



THE HOLY GRAIL OF ERIS

4

KUJIRA TOKIWA

Illustration by YU-NAGI



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HOLY GRAIL
OF ERIS
4





"Oh, Miss Scarlett!"

"What?"

**"Aren't you going to sleep with us,
Miss Scarlett...?"**

"Why would I—"

Seeing Lucia's innocent, expectant gaze,
she softly clicked her tongue.

"Fine, but just for tonight."

Sandwiched between Connie and Scarlett,
Lucia giggled happily.

“...What’s
with the
hand?”

This was the night when the
dead and the living joined hands
and danced till dawn.

And so...

Connie grinned broadly at her
skeptical partner-in-crime.

“Let’s dance, Scarlett!”



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The Holy Grail of Eris

author Kujira Tokiwa

illustration Yu-nagi

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ILLUSTRATION BY YU-NAGI



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KUJIRA TOKIWA

Translation by Winifred Bird Cover art by Yu-nagi

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PROLOGUE



Scarlett was *holding back*.

Needless to say, for Scarlett, “holding back” was one of most irrelevant and abhorrent phrases in the world. But that day’s event—the yearly gathering of the entire family in the Castiel domain to celebrate a bountiful harvest—was extremely important and sacred. It wouldn’t do for a fit of anger on her part to spoil the whole thing.

If only she had been a little older.

Then she might have had more options. If only she’d had more experience and could speak a little more eloquently.

Then maybe instead of this wretched holding back, she could have charged into battle.

But Scarlett Castiel hadn’t even debuted yet. She was still a child, and frustratingly, under these circumstances, silence was her best option.

She knew that. She knew it well, and yet...

“To think, a hostess not greeting her guests! Was she raised by wolves?”

Hearing those words of contempt directed at her mother, Aliénore, was simply unforgivable.

“Oh, but her education must have been noble, indeed. I hear she was brought up at a shrine. That must be why—she doesn’t bow her head to anyone but the gods.”

Jeering laughter rippled through the group. What a thoroughly aristocratic brand of nastiness. *They should be ashamed!* Scarlett thought. She vowed that should she ever end up in their place, backbiting was one thing she would never do.

No—she would hurl her curses and jeers right at her targets’ faces.

“But the shrines over there are like our churches, aren’t they? Only problem

children and unwanted orphans are given to churches. How in the world did someone like that end up married to Adolphus?”

“I heard the person serving as her guardian is distantly related to the king.”

“Oh, is that it? Still, what a letdown. I thought people from her country were more cultured and refined. Turns out they’re no better than savages!”

“What can you expect? I heard she’s not even from the mainland. Let’s see, I think it was one of those distant islands—”

“An island? How horrid. Can she even read and write?”

There was a burst of sneering laughter. No, she wouldn’t be able to hold back after all. Fury flaring in her amethyst eyes, Scarlett took a step toward the offending voices.

Just then, someone quietly took her hand. Their palm was gentle and soft. Scarlett glanced up in surprise. Aliénore was looking down at her teasingly. She met Scarlett’s gaze and placed a finger over her lips.

“Let them talk,” she said.

“But—”

“Let them. They don’t know that your mother came from a special place.”

Scarlett’s eyes flickered in confusion.

“Come now, Scarlett. Didn’t you know? They even have a song about it in Adelbide. It’s quite famous. *O beautiful El Sol, O holy isle beloved by the sun...*,” Aliénore sang cheerfully. “But that’s not all. The secret of the world is hidden there.”

“...The secret of the world?”

“Yes. A very special secret, too. Would you like to know it?”

Scarlett nodded meekly. Aliénore stroked her head.

“Then when you get a little older, go to my homeland.”

Scarlett pouted, her disappointment obvious.

“Won’t you tell me now?”

“Of course not. That’s our family rule.”

“Our family rule? That’s horrible. Who made up an awful rule like that...?!”

“Cornelia Faris.”

Aliénore leaned down to whisper in Scarlett’s ear, like she was about to tell her a very special secret.

“Listen carefully, Scarlett. This is a message from the great imperial princess herself.”

Her amethyst eyes, so similar to Scarlett’s, sparkled for a moment like stars in the night sky.

“If you want to lay hold of the world, search for Cornelia’s starry crown.”

Blue sky and blue sea. A passenger liner threaded its way through the water, its white wake the only contrast in this endless world of blue.

“Oh, I see it...!” Constance Grail cried, leaning over the boat’s railing. If she squinted, she could make out the faint mountain ridges of an island in the distance. Elated to finally catch a glimpse of their destination, she glanced over her shoulder and met a pair of equally excited eyes.

The younger girl was as pretty as a picture-book angel, with rosy cheeks and fluffy, honey-colored hair blowing in the sea breeze. Standing on tiptoe, she pointed at the city rising from the glittering water.

“Miss Connie, do you think that’s El Sol?!”

“I do, Lucia!”

They were clasping hands and dancing in circles when a wave abruptly jolted the ship. They stumbled, and Connie dropped Lucia’s hands with a surprised “Oh my!” Fortunately, Lucia kept her footing and remained standing, in a daze. But Connie was relieved for only a moment before she started to topple backward, having failed to regain her balance.

“M-Miss Connie?!”

Just as the clear blue sky filled Connie’s field of vision, a pair of strong arms grabbed her.

“...Huh?”

It took her a second to realize that someone had caught her mid-fall. What’s more, an unsettling coolness was now emanating from that person’s body. Connie glanced timidly over her shoulder. As she’d feared, the face frowning back wore a sour expression.

“How many times do I have to tell you, boats rock! You need to be more careful!” Randolph Ulster said, scrunching his already intimidating face into an even more frightening grimace.

Scolded like an unreasonable child, Connie looked away. She'd never been on a boat before. Couldn't she get just a little excited? Her minor dissatisfaction must have shown on her face, because Randolph's eyes grew still more forbidding.

"Constance."

As Connie did her utmost to pretend she couldn't hear that voice, so low it seemed to crawl over the ground, the little blond-haired angel's eyes went wide and she threw out her arms as if to protect Connie.

"Mr. Randolph, please don't make that terrible face! You're frightening Miss Connie."

"I hardly think so," he snapped back after a quick glance at his unrepentant fiancée. *Incomprehensible*.

"I swear," a fourth voice cut in, light as a tinkling bell.

Connie looked up from force of habit, but no one was there. Finding this suspicious, she glanced around and noticed that a ridiculously luxurious chair had been set out on the deck. With its soft crimson fabric and delicate gold embroidery, it looked just like a throne. And reclining on this throne with her chin in her hand like she owned the place was a teenage girl.

"All of you need to calm down," Scarlett Castiel said with an exasperated sigh. Stretching, she clasped her hands behind her head and smiled with satisfaction at the warm sunshine. No doubt about it—she was sunbathing.

"We're not here to play, so I'll thank you to stop frolicking," she said with a shrug. The beautiful ghost was so obviously excited herself that Connie was tempted to say, *Look who's talking*, but she valued her life too much to let the words slip out of her mouth.

Constance Grail, Lucia O'Brian, Randolph Ulster, and a certain vengeful ghost were aboard a ship owned by the Walter Robinson Company and headed for the island of El Sol, in the southern sea of the Republic of Soldita. The cover for their trip was tourism, but in truth, they were on a proper mission by order of the king.

It all started with a letter from Alexandra, the young new queen of

neighboring Faris. It was not an official document, but a very personal note to her ally King Ernst, asking him to check in on her dear little brother because she was too overwhelmed with her duties as queen to do so herself.

Ulysses, the seventh prince of Faris, had been studying abroad in Soldita since winter. For the most part, he lived at his boarding school, but during summer vacation, he wasn't allowed to stay in the dorms. In truth, studying abroad was merely a pretense; the real reason he was in Soldita was to get away from the pointless power struggles in Faris. And so, while the new queen solidified her position, he was to spend the summer in Soldita with his mother's relatives.

It seemed that Alexandra was quite distraught over the situation, and she appealed to King Ernst to at least let Ulysses see his dear friend. Of course, by "dear friend," she meant Lucia O'Brian, who had been through thick and thin with Ulysses in Adelbide.

"We became friends in that awful dungeon, so that makes us prison buddies!" Lucia insisted.

"I wouldn't quite put it like that...!" said Connie.

Just because Ulysses had given up his succession rights didn't mean there was no value to his royal lineage. After all, Faris was a kingdom that placed particular emphasis on bloodlines. And Adelbide wanted to avoid unnecessarily stressing the bonds of friendship it had worked so hard to establish with its neighbor. So Connie—that is, Constance Grail—was singled out for the job.



At first glance, Connie was merely the unremarkable daughter of a low-ranking noble. But she knew both Queen Alexandra and Lucia O'Brian, and most importantly, she was engaged to the one and only Randolph Ulster. The powerful lieutenant commander could make hardened military men quake in their boots, and if he went along with the party traveling to Soldita, they wouldn't need a large escort, allowing them to maintain the front of an innocent holiday. At least, that was what the big shots in Adelbide seemed to think.

This worked out well for Connie, of course. She doted on Lucia and would be happy to see her enjoy herself. But best of all, it was an unexpected opportunity to spend some quality time with her workaholic fiancé, Randolph. In fact, she was thrilled to volunteer for the role. Scarlett had been the one to drag her feet.



“—I just don't like it,” Scarlett said when she'd finished reading the letter from the House of O'Brian detailing the events leading up to the plan.

“Her *ally*? Alexandra and His Highness only cooperated on the Daeg Gallus affair because their interests happened to align. Saying they pulled the wool over each other's eyes would be putting it generously. I can't think of anything fishier than a personal letter in a situation like this. And besides, Alexandra isn't touchy-feely enough to be that worried about her little brother.”

“Those are some nasty accusations,” Connie said. Scarlett snorted.

“What accusations? Ulysses kept himself together in the worst situation imaginable. Spending a little time away from his family in a foreign country should be nothing for him. It's not like his life is in danger. Alexandra should know that. She must have some ulterior motive, like wanting the O'Brians to back Ulysses.”

“You really think San would do something that sneaky...?”

“Idiot, it's not sneaky; it's a negotiation. That's why His Highness sounded Abigail out and she accepted the proposition. I don't know what her thinking is, but she obviously concluded that it would be to her advantage to do Faris a

favor. Plus, she's made a show of naming you to avoid being taken advantage of by partisans opposed to the new queen. In other words, we've been roped into an annoying job with no benefits!"

Connie was confused. Knowing Abigail, she probably went along with the plan simply to make Lucia happy, not because she was calculating the advantages. And...

"This means Randolph will be able to take a real vacation from work."

Randolph's job was demanding, to put it mildly. Holidays were practically nonexistent, and in the rare event he was off duty, he inevitably got called back in. Three days off in a row was a distant fantasy. But since this was practically a royal mission, he'd been officially granted an extended leave.

In other words, they could be together, uninterrupted by work. Connie smiled without meaning to, provoking Scarlett to shoot up her eyebrows. The apparition then narrowed her eyes and said irritably, "Why should I care about that?"

Connie staggered at this verbal slap. Apparently, Queen Scarlett was cross.

"Listen to me, Connie. You might be engaged, but you're not married yet! If you think you're going to be spending night after night alone with him, you're one hundred years too early! At least!"

"Lucia will be with us, too, you know."

In fact, Lucia was the whole reason for the trip. Not wanting to poke the hornet's nest, Connie decided not to mention that in a hundred years they would all have moved on to the next world.

"...So you're against the trip, Scarlett?"

"Do I look like I'm *for* it?" she snapped. Connie slumped her shoulders.

"Oh...I thought you would be excited since Lady Aliénore was from the Republic of Soldita."

"My mother grew up on an island," Scarlett sulked, looking away.

"An island?" Connie asked. "She wasn't from El Sol, was she?"

Scarlett looked slightly startled.

“I’m surprised you know that much about Soldita,” she said.

“But that’s where we’re going.”

“What?”

“It’s supposed to be cool in the summer. It sounds like most of the old noble families in Soldita have villas on the island and spend the season there.”

Connie had heard that Ulysses was already on El Sol for summer vacation.

“...Is that so?”

Scarlett appeared lost in thought. Then, unexpectedly, an unnatural smile spread over her face.

“Get packing, Connie.”

“Huh?”

Her grumpiness of a minute earlier was gone. Connie was happy to see Scarlett smiling, of course, but the speed of her transformation was extremely suspicious.

“Why the sudden change of heart?” she asked.

“I haven’t the slightest interest in Soldita, but I’ve always wanted to visit El Sol.”

“You have? Because Lady Aliénore grew up there?”

“Partly...but also because Cornelia Faris’s starry crown is supposed to be on that island.”

“Her crown...?”

Connie blinked her pale green eyes.

“Um, you mean the kind of crown royal people wear on their heads...?”

That glittering gold symbol of power?

“Idiot. Of course it’s not a real crown. My mother told me about it a long time ago. ‘If you want to lay hold of the world, search for Cornelia’s starry crown.’”

“That’s a little scary...”

“Lay hold of the world” was quite the unsettling phrase. Connie had a creeping suspicion it would inevitably involve a lot of blood. Her excitement plummeting, she had a sudden urge to turn down Abigail’s offer. But a moment later she reconsidered.

“So you promised Lady Aliénore...”

This must be one of Scarlett’s few memories of her mother. Didn’t that mean Connie had to go along with the plan, for Scarlett’s sake? As she scolded herself for being such a coward and clenched her fists in an attempt to fire herself up, Scarlett gave her a strange look.

“It wasn’t a promise. She just mentioned it in passing.”

“Really?”

Connie was puzzled by Scarlett’s overly casual tone.

“Um, so then why...?”

Scarlett smiled seductively at her.

“Oh, I’ve just been so bored lately.”

“Bored?”

“Yes, bored. Remember this, Connie. Boredom kills.”

Connie wanted to point out that Scarlett was already dead, but she decided that would be insensitive and said nothing.

“Anyhow, this is just perfect. Don’t you think laying hold of the world sounds fun?”

Um, no. Not at all, thought Connie honestly. But those sparkling amethyst eyes got the better of her, and she found herself unable to say so.

Two weeks later, they were on the boat to El Sol.



With a long toot of its horn, the boat pulled into a brick-red harbor. They had arrived at Cyon Port, known as the doorstep of El Sol. As they glided up to the

wharf, a crew member tossed a rope from the bow. Some men in charge of mooring caught it and wrapped it with practiced motions around a post.

Connie watched the unfamiliar scene curiously. Presently, a crew member appeared on deck and announced that they could now disembark. Someone was already waiting to meet them at the bottom of the gangplank.

The boy looking shyly up at them was a little older than in Connie's memory. But the fragile beauty that reminded her of a tenderly raised maiden was unchanged. His eyes were violet. No doubt about it, this was Ulysses Faris, Alexandra's youngest brother and the seventh prince of Faris.

Standing next to him was a boy who looked about the same age. He was the same height and had the same haircut as Ulysses, but his cheeks were freckled and he wore an extremely sour look on his face.

As Connie wondered who he could be, Randolph whispered, "He's probably a member of the Duke of Fargo's household. I've heard the current duke, Basilio, has a son. If memory serves, he's at boarding school and should be in the same grade as Ulysses."

Fargo? Connie had never heard that name before.

"Ulysses's mother's family," Scarlett explained. "Basilio is Ulysses's uncle, which would make his son the boy's cousin."

Funny, she thought. *They don't look much alike.* As Connie walked down the gangplank, the cousin in question stared at her. She had been about to greet him but clammed up under his rude gaze. After he looked her slowly up and down, an extremely disappointed look came over his face. *Incomprehensible.*

As Connie examined him skeptically, a golden mass flew past her down the gangplank. It was Lucia. With a shout of "Uly!" and an ear-to-ear smile, she threw her arms around the prince. She must have hit him harder than he was expecting, because he groaned and staggered back a few steps. The boy standing next to him gaped in amazement, but the moment his eyes met Lucia's, he turned beet red. He coughed, then said to her, "I—I'll be friends with you, too."

Connie tilted her head. What did that mean? She thought she heard Scarlett

say, “Oh, so he’s just shallow,” but then decided she’d imagined it.

Lucia looked confused for a second as well, but then smiled broadly and said, “I’m not allowed to talk to anyone whose name I don’t know!”

The boy froze at this clear rejection. Then, in a tiny voice, he said that his name was Antonio Fargo. Connie could see tears gathering in his eyes.

As Scarlett had said, Antonio’s father, Basilio, was the older brother of Ulysses’s mother, Irene, making him Ulysses’s cousin. When the greetings were done, Antonio announced that they would head to the boarding pier.

Lucia looked up at Ulysses with a puzzled expression.

“We’re going on another boat?” she asked.

“Just a gondola. People mostly get around El Sol on canals,” he answered, smiling kindly.

He explained that the roads on the island were as tangled as a maze and so narrow a carriage could never fit down them. But the broad Canal Grande spanned the island, with a network of canals large and small branching off it. That was why islanders used the peculiarly shaped gondolas for almost all their travel.

Some of the gondolas were like hansom cabs, which could be shared with other travelers for a fee, but most were privately owned. Connie and the others would be taking a gondola owned by the House of Fargo that was tied up at a nearby pier.

When they reached the pier, they were shown to a gondola with a laurel bough and lily carved into the bow—the Fargo family crest. The gondolier was a cheerful young fellow named Marco. His family had been in service with the House of Fargo since his father’s generation. Marco himself was not a full-time gondolier, but rather Antonio’s servant. Since he was athletic, however, he rowed the gondola when the family was staying on the island.

“I’m happy to see such a crowd today!” he said. “And two lovely ladies among them! Aren’t we lucky, young master? I must tell you, my young master has a weakness for pretty faces.”

“That’s not true. And there’s only one ‘lovely lady’ in this group,” he snapped back rudely. Marco froze, throwing a panicked glance at Connie. As she was trying to make sense of the situation, Randolph softly rested his hand on her shoulder, like he wanted to comfort her. *Huh?*



“Ah, well, I suppose our young master is used to seeing beautiful people! Duke Basilio is a handsome man himself, and his Aunt Irene was such a legendary beauty, she was married off to the royal family.” Marco’s tone was apologetic, and he glanced furtively at Connie. *Huh?*

“Coming from a family like that, it’s no wonder you have a complex about looking like a little bully. Right, young master?”

“I don’t have a c-complex...!”

“Don’t you? Who was it, then, who used to cry and ask me why your face didn’t glow like your father’s? And who was it, upon meeting Prince Ulysses for the first time, who broke down in tears over the fact that he had the same hair and eye color yet for some reason glowed like a little woodland sprite?”

Ulysses looked up, startled by the sudden mention of his name. With each blink of his eyes, his golden lashes cast languid shadows on his cheeks. His features were as fine as a glass sculpture, and if someone had told Connie he was a sprite that had wandered unintentionally into the earthly realm, she probably would have believed them. It was also true that Antonio had similar coloring to the prince: soft golden hair and blue eyes. They were similar in height, too. Strictly speaking, Ulysses’s eyes were violet, but from a distance, they looked almost the same color as Antonio’s. Connie could understand why he might cry at the unfairness of it.

“You idiot, wh-why are you bringing that up now?!” Antonio snapped.

“Why now? Because you were just crying about how you want to be better friends with Prince Ulysses. This is a perfect opportunity, so how about dropping the tough guy act? Don’t worry, young master, you’re a tad contrary, but beneath it all, you’re a good boy.”

“I told you, I didn’t cry...!”

Antonio’s voice gradually grew softer, until finally he wrapped his arms around his knees and curled into a ball. Ulysses squatted worriedly by his side, whispering something to him as the boat slowly drifted away from the pier.

When Connie looked up at Marco, the young man winked and smiled at her. *Interesting.*

The canals near the port were narrower than she had expected, barely wide enough for a single boat. Brick warehouses lined either side, their charming red hue highlighted by the blue sky. She was gazing absently at this peaceful scene when it occurred to her to pull an old book from her luggage. The time-worn binding must have sparked Lucia's curiosity, because she sidled up to Connie and asked what she was reading.

"I'm glad you asked!" Connie giggled. "This book has been treasured by many generations of Grails!"

In fact, it had been the personal possession of Percival Grail, the first Viscount Grail. The book in her hands was a copy, of course, but in a family whose motto was simplicity and thrift, even this copy had been in use since her great-grandfather's time. By now, the leather cover was faded and worn through in places.

"It's a travelogue about El Sol. Isn't that an amazing coincidence?"

Titled *A Lost Man's Compass*, the book described in detail not only the island's tourist destinations, but its climate, culture, and customs as well. Since descriptions of foreign kingdoms were rare in Percival's day, the book had apparently been used by generations of Grails to learn about the lands beyond Adelbide. These days, of course, it was more a historical document than a practical one.

When the trip to El Sol was decided, Connie remembered the book and dug it up from her father's study.

"Look, here's a map of El Sol, with the names of popular tourist destinations back then! I thought it would be fun to do a comparison," she said, opening to the first page. Lucia looked on with sparkling eyes. As she inspected the map with boundless curiosity, she suddenly tilted her head in confusion.

"Miss Connie, in this book the island is called the Republic of Soldita."

"That's because when this book was written, El Sol was all there was to Soldita."

Soldita had started out as a small island kingdom. The tourism industry wasn't very big back then, and it was said to have escaped invasion by Faris because it

was naturally protected by the ocean and because there wouldn't have been any benefit in possessing it.

"That's mighty suspicious," Scarlett announced, looking over Connie's shoulder.

"What's suspicious?" Connie asked.

"That book. Was it really written in Percival Grail's day? Back then, Soldita was a country backwater, not the sort of place anyone would go for a vacation. Adelbide itself was newly independent and probably still politically unstable. Who would have wanted to buy a travelogue about an unknown island? Plus..."

She pointed to the spine, where the author's name was written.

"I've never heard of an author called Sena Rilifarco."

"Oh, I heard he wasn't an author, but a merchant," said Connie. "He wrote this for fun, so it probably wasn't very widely read."

The beginning of the book explained that Rilifarco was a merchant from Adelbide who happened to visit the island on a buying trip. It caught his fancy, and he ended up staying for a long time.

Scarlett threw Connie a sly glance.

"Have you ever met a merchant who's not out for profit? And why would your ancestors own a book like that? I'm growing more suspicious by the second."

"Uh..."

Connie's confidence evaporated. *Why, indeed?*

Her father had told her the book was very important to Percival Grail, but no doubt he only believed that because his father had told him the same thing. And her grandfather—like all members of the Grail family, herself included—was a simple person.

"Ha-ha! Just kidding... Connie? Are you listening?" Scarlett said. But Connie was too lost in thought to hear her. As she crossed her arms and fretted over this new question, Marco called out from behind.

"We're about to enter the main canal!"

When Connie looked up, she couldn't help gasping.

"Wow!"

As the narrow side canal merged with the main waterway, an exotic cityscape unfurled before her eyes. Buildings painted in fairyland colors stood at even intervals while, below them, street performers played rhythmic melodies. Connie peered around curiously, listening to the hustle and bustle of the crowd. This must be the high street. It was lined with touristy souvenir shops, elegant eateries, and jewelry stores.

"...Huh?"

Weird masks were hanging from most of the shop signs and eaves. Crescents were carved out for the eyes, and they were painted so the left half was black and the right half was white.

"W-what are those?" Connie asked Marco.

"Those? Oh, those are the masks of the dead."

"The dead?" She glanced back at him, disturbed.

"Yes. It's almost time for Carnival."

"Carni...?"

"Carnival. The masked ball."

A masked ball? She grimaced reflexively. The phrase brought back bad memories. She thought of the shady Earl John Doe Ball, where couples had brazenly embraced and human beings had been bought and sold. What kind of moral fabric must this island have if people talked about a lawless event like that in broad daylight?

Connie glanced around uncomfortably until Marco broke out laughing and explained that this was the "clean kind of ball." Apparently, it wasn't the sort of event she'd been imagining, but rather a traditional festival that people of all ages took part in.

"They say it began as a celebration of the day each year when the spirits of the dead return to their families. Those masks symbolize the earthly realm and the realm of the dead. Hanging one outside your shop signals that you will

welcome the dead. At the festival, everyone wears masks and costumes so that the spirits can join in. They say that in olden times the dead and the living used to dance the night away hand in hand.”

“So that’s why they call it a masked ball...”

“Of course, these days it’s mainly a tourist attraction that ends before midnight. But all sorts of stalls are set up, and at the very end, they hold the Muro di Luche.”

“What’s that?” Connie asked.

“The grand finale of the festival—a firecracker show. Firecrackers are wrapped around the railings of the Mezzaluna Pier and set off all at once. The name means ‘wall of light,’ but it’s really just a big explosion. Anyway, it’s the climax of the festival, so you won’t want to miss it.”

An amiable smile spread over Marco’s face. *How I’d love to go!* Connie thought. When she glanced excitedly at Randolph, he nodded at her without cracking a smile. She couldn’t help giggling. She ignored the ghostly voice that said, “Ugh, that expression of his creeps me out!”

The gondola glided slowly down the Canal Grande.

“That mansion on our right covered in ivy is the old Latué residence. The owner, Lorenzo Latué, was the last sovereign of El Sol.”

Marco apparently intended to serve not only as gondolier but also as tour guide.

“Ah, the Latués,” Scarlett said, narrowing her eyes slightly.

“Is something wrong?” Connie whispered to her.

“I’m fairly certain Lorenzo’s son Tobias was the husband of Sylvia Latué.”

“...Sylvia Latué?”

The name was unfamiliar to Connie.

“Ah, you know of her?” Marco asked, sounding impressed, before glancing meaningfully at his master, Antonio. “The young master isn’t very fond of history, so he’s probably never heard of her.”

"I know th-that much. Sylvia Latué was the blind saint, wasn't she?"

"A saint?" Lucia asked. "We've got a saint in Adelbide, too."

"Ah yes, Saint Anastasia," Marco answered. "I've heard she visited the battlefields to heal the wounded and hearten the soldiers. I think Sylvia Latué lived around the same time. But Sylvia was born with poor vision and couldn't play an active public role. Instead, they say she donated to orphanages and supported the establishment of charity hospitals. Many mysteries remain about her personal life. People say her illness kept her away from others, and that even in her mansion she wore a black veil to hide her horrible birthmarks. And..."

He paused.

"...they say she may have been a refugee from abroad."

"A refugee?"

"Yes. There were quite a few after Faris fell apart, I believe. She supposedly came from a lower noble family in the Republic, but no record of her birth remains."

Lucia clapped her hands together.

"I know! It was love!" she exclaimed.

"Love?" Marco echoed, confused.

"Yes! Sylvia wasn't a noble, I'm sure of it!" she announced, full of confidence. "Tobias must have forged her family register so he could be with the person he loved!"

Suppressing a smile, Marco said, "You're half right."

"Only half?"

"You're right that she wasn't a noble. They say that Sylvia Latué was the last imperial princess of Faris."

The last imperial princess of Faris?

"You don't mean she was Cornelia Faris?!" Connie exclaimed in surprise.

"There are various theories, but in short, yes. When the revolutionary army

rebelled, Cornelia was studying in the Republic. She met Tobias Latué there, and they fell madly in love. In the end, she stayed there as an exile, but there is no record of her whereabouts after that.”

Connie was dumbstruck.

“That’s a true story,” Scarlett broke in casually. “My mother’s family name was Shibola, but in truth she descended from the Latués. The fact that Cornelia Faris was Sylvia Latué was never officially acknowledged, but everyone in Soldita knew it. Incidentally, the House of Fargo is collaterally descended from Cornelia.”

“It is...?!”

“Yes. If I remember correctly, Sylvia’s second son married into the family and took their last name. I suspect that also explains why Ulysses’s mother was welcomed into the Royal House of Faris.”

Faris valued pure bloodlines. The royal family must have been trying to strengthen their own, even slightly. It was hard for an Adelbidian to understand.

As Connie was frowning over this new puzzle, an old-looking white building came into view.

“That’s the old Tharu Charitable Hospital,” Marco explained. “A new one was built several years back on Aidel Street, so the government bought the old building and turned it into a courthouse. Oh, and do you see that brick spire behind it? That’s the Central Clock Tower...”

He explained that back when the charitable hospital was built, it was intended to have religious significance, and the large hospital grounds were dotted with spires of various sizes so that it resembled a foreign palace.

“...Huh?”

As Connie stared absently at the old hospital, she noticed something odd. A crowd was gathered near the front gate, where guards were stationed. Was it a tour group? *How peculiar*. Just then, she heard Antonio softly click his tongue.

“Marco, stop the boat,” he ordered.

She looked back at him. He was glaring at the courthouse as if he’d seen his

sworn enemy. It wasn't a very becoming expression for a young boy.

"Are you in earnest, young master?" Marco asked elusively, without losing his light tone.

"Stop dodging and pull the boat over now."

Marco glanced at the line of gondolas moored in front of the courthouse. When his gaze fell on one in particular, he scowled.

"But look! That tasteless boat must belong to the rat. If we run into him, there's sure to be trouble..."

"Just stop the boat, man. The Bell of Judgment will be ringing soon."

Marco sighed quietly at his master's stubborn attitude, then turned to Connie and the others.

"I'm sorry, would you forgive us for dealing with a bit of business here? It shouldn't take long."

Connie looked at Randolph, who nodded. Marco bowed his head in what seemed like relief and pulled the boat into a side canal.

"What's the matter?" Connie asked.

"That worthless Carlo Vecchio has been picking fights again this year," Antonio answered sullenly.

"Carlo Vecchio?"

"He's a corrupt noble. He belongs to the Grand Council, as does my father, and blames him for the fact that he's incompetent and can't get ahead in the world. Every time we visit the island in summer, he harasses us by filing lawsuits."

"L-lawsuits?" Connie echoed, alarmed.

"Ahh yes," Scarlett said, nodding like she'd remembered something. "Soldita is famous as the land of lawsuits. This is not good, Constance. You have a bad habit of sticking your nose into things that are none of your business, so you'd better be careful not to get sued while we're here."

I'd rather not hear that from the woman who causes all my problems, Connie

thought.

“Usually he names Basilio in his suits, but this time he’s suing the young master,” Marco explained. “The public trial is taking place in the courthouse today. The judgment should be issued soon...”

“Come on, Marco, you’re talking like it’s no business of yours, but this time you’re involved, too!” Antonio retorted.

“...What, now?”

When Connie asked what he meant, they explained that, about ten days earlier, Antonio had been heading into town in the gondola when a gust of wind blew another gondola into his. Unsurprisingly, Carlo Vecchio was aboard the other boat.

“Even though he was obviously the one steering recklessly, he claimed we hit his boat first. He’s suing for hospital fees, claiming he hurt his back and can’t walk.”

“It sounds like he’s just picking a fight...”

“He is. As you might guess, our young master doesn’t need to appear in court to defend himself in such a trifling case, so his father has sent a representative. But it seems Carlo has come in person.”

“Incidentally,” Antonio said, “last year he tripped on a stone when he was passing our house and cracked the antique vase he was carrying. He sued us for compensation.”

“Why would he be walking around with a vase...?”

“How should I know? He just wanted to blame us for something,” the boy snapped. Marco smiled wryly.

“They’d laugh him out of town on the mainland, but on the island, there’s not much by way of entertainment. It happens every year, to the point that it’s become a summer ritual.”

Apparently that was why the crowd had gathered. Carlo’s claims were always dismissed, Marco said, and that was the end of it. *What a farce*, Connie thought, feeling very sympathetic for the Fargo family.

The courthouse had its own pier with several ferries already docked there. Posts for tying up boats stood at even intervals at the edge of the canal, and Marco secured the gondola to one of these with confident motions. The group then stepped onto dry land.

A large, boisterous crowd was gathered outside the courthouse. Some of the onlookers appeared to be tourists, but most were likely locals. They must have come to see the much-talked-about trial. But since they couldn't go inside, they were reduced to waiting at the entrance.

When Connie asked what they hoped to do there, Marco answered, "They're waiting to hear the Bell of Judgment. Remember the clock tower behind the courthouse? There's a large bell under the clock that's rung a different number of times depending on the verdict. For example, in a regular case, it's rung once if the plaintiff wins and twice if they lose. In a criminal suit, it's rung once for a guilty verdict and twice for an innocent verdict. That's why it's called the Bell of Judgment—"

At that very moment, a low sound vibrated in Connie's ears. The bell seemed loud enough to shake the whole city. It rang once more. *He said they ring it twice when the plaintiff loses*, she thought, remembering what Marco had just told her. Marco smiled as if to say, "Told you so." But a moment later—

It rang for a third time.

"What just happened...?" Connie asked, blinking. But the bell didn't stop. It rang four, then five times, the low bass clang echoing across the island. "What does it mean...?"

She looked at Marco, hoping for an answer. His face tensed.

"This can't be," he muttered.

Suddenly, the crowd erupted. "A duel!" "Trial by combat!" "Go get 'im!" people began to shout. Shocked by their ferocity, Lucia clung to Connie's leg. As Connie blinked in confusion, Randolph squinted and lowered his voice. "...Trial by combat, eh? This is turning into quite a mess."

"Trial...by combat?" Connie echoed. She felt like she'd heard the term before but couldn't quite remember. Next to her, Antonio was outright scowling.

“That devil Carlo must’ve bribed the judge!”

“Or maybe the judge has finally given up in the face of that bullheaded man’s foul temper. Well, the first thing we’d better do is tell your father,” Marco said, turning to walk back to the boat. But someone blocked his way.

“Well, well, if it isn’t the honorable son of the House of Fargo.”

The speaker smiled sarcastically at them. He had plastered-back ivory hair and looked high strung. Although the man himself was scrawny, several burly bodyguards stood behind him. He carried an ostentatious staff ornamented with gold and jewels, which appeared to be more for show than actual support.

“Since you sent a representative, I thought you’d be too spineless to show up.”

“...Carlo Vecchio,” Antonio spat out with deep revulsion. Carlo didn’t seem to hear him.

“You heard the Bell of Judgment, I assume? Even a stupid boy like you must know what it means.”

“Young master, do not engage with him,” Marco warned.

“So the help bosses the master around in your family?” Carlo sneered. “Savage stock really is different, I suppose. And now you’re going to run off again like a scared puppy? You’re a coward just like your father, Basilio, injuring people and then shirking responsibility.”

The atmosphere was tense, but something else was bothering Connie. She pressed her temples as she tried to put her finger on what it was.

“Connie?” Scarlett asked.

“I feel like I’ve heard the term ‘trial by combat’ before...”

As she spoke, it came to her. She pulled the old book from her purse and began flipping the pages.

“Here it is!”

She scanned the text. It described in detail a trial of the olden days. Back then, the courthouse was at a temple rather than in the old hospital. But other than

that, not much seemed different. Then, too, verdicts were announced to the islanders by ringing the bell below the clock tower. One toll meant guilty, and two, innocent. When the bell didn't stop ringing, it meant the verdict was neither innocent nor guilty, but rather that the trial would be decided by combat.

Trial by combat meant a duel between the plaintiff and the defendant. The outcome determined whether the accused was innocent or guilty. Various conditions could be specified, but the method was simple: a fight to the death with weapons.

When Connie reached that line, she screamed.

"Wait, they're going to kill each other?"

"Calm down, Constance," Randolph said. "There hasn't been a real duel with weapons in a long time. The battle these days is verbal, I believe."

"Verbal?"

"It's a debate."

According to Randolph, present-day trials by combat typically took place in public, and the judge decided the verdict based on the reaction of the spectators.

"Obviously they don't use it for criminal cases, or when the sum being sought is more than a thousand gil. In other words, it's for petty cases that never should have been brought to court in the first place."

"I feel like Antonio will be at a bit of a disadvantage..."

Connie had only just met him, but from what she could tell, the boy said whatever came to mind. She frowned. No doubt he'd dig his own grave and let Carlo talk him straight into it.

"Not likely," Randolph said. "He may be a party to the case, but he's still a child. They'll almost certainly put the trial off and send a representative in his place."

"I wonder," Scarlett said, smiling nastily as she tilted her head. But just as Connie was worrying about Scarlett's loaded tone, she heard yelling nearby.

“What did you say?!” someone was shouting.

She looked in the direction of the voice. A red-faced Antonio Fargo was lunging at Carlo Vecchio.

“Fine! If you’re going to take it that far, then call the judge! I, Antonio Fargo, will take you on myself!”

“See?” Scarlett said with a shrug. To Antonio’s side, Marco stood with his face in his hands and his shoulders slumped.

The judge, who had white hair, a white beard, and pure white robes, was sitting at a wooden desk with his chin in his hand, looking profoundly annoyed. The court clerk had just carried the desk in from a warehouse. A gavel had been tossed carelessly onto it.

A far larger crowd than earlier had gathered outside the courthouse. Trial by combat customarily took place outside, and the islanders had flocked to the spectacle. Courthouse staff bustled around getting everything ready.

“How am I ever going to make this up to the master...?” Marco moaned.

“Stop talking like I’ve already lost!” shouted Antonio.

The drooping Marco seemed to have given up all hope. Randolph was helping the courthouse staff while Connie looked around curiously.

Furniture set on the ground roughly divided the area into a plaintiff’s table, a defendant’s table, and a judge’s bench. The men Connie had earlier assumed to be bodyguards were seated at the plaintiff’s table, but Carlo Vecchio himself was nowhere to be seen. As she was wondering where he could have gone, someone shoved her roughly aside, grunting, “You’re in the way!” It didn’t hurt, but it didn’t feel good, either. She looked up sullenly to find Carlo Vecchio squinting churlishly at her.

“What are you, one of the Fargos’ maids? The more I look at you, the plainer you get.”

“...Excuse me?”

He’d clearly mistaken her for a servant. She wasn’t wearing a uniform, but neither was Marco, so maybe he figured she was trying to blend in with the

crowd. Plus, her dress was simple and easy to move in. The fabric was of good quality, but the design was no different from what a commoner would wear. Anyway, she knew better than anyone that her face was plain or worse than plain, so she didn't argue with him.

"You're perfectly suited to that ugly boy. Poor wretch didn't inherit the one thing his father was ever praised for—his looks."

Connie gaped at the man's extreme rudeness. Then, realizing Antonio might have overheard, she glanced fearfully in his direction. She prayed he hadn't been listening to their conversation. But no, he seemed to have heard every word and was now biting his lip as he stared glumly at the ground. Without thinking, Connie rested her hand on his head. His eyebrows shot up and his mouth fell open.

Just then, Lucia came prancing over to them. She positioned herself in front of the surprised Connie and pointed her finger accusingly at Carlo.

"I feel much sorrier for you than for him!" she declared. "Before you talk about people, you ought to take a look in the mirror! You're hideous, sir!"

At first, Carlo looked shocked, but as the meaning of her words sank in, he exploded into a rage.

"Shut your mouth, little girl!" he shouted, raising his staff.

"Stop!" Connie screamed. Lucia's eyes widened in surprise. Then she shrank back and curled up to protect herself. The staff cut through empty air and slammed against the ground.

"What's going on?" Randolph shouted, squinting harshly as he strode toward them. Carlo clicked his tongue and returned to the plaintiff's table and his bodyguards.

"Lucia!" Connie cried, running to the girl.

"I'm fine," she said, grinning as she lay on the ground. Connie was relieved to see her unharmed, but anger quickly surged in her chest. She glared as hard as she could at Carlo and took a deep breath. She knew she wouldn't feel better until she gave him a piece of her mind. Just then, Scarlett called to her from behind.

When Connie turned around, Scarlett narrowed her amethyst eyes and rested her chin wearily in her hand.

“I believe that man needs to be taught a lesson,” she announced.

Connie agreed wholeheartedly. She was about to nod when she remembered that her rather frightening fiancé was standing next to her. When she looked at him, his eyebrows flinched with realization.

“Wait, Constance, don’t do anything rash—”

Whispering a silent apology to him, she turned back to Scarlett and nodded. Scarlett smiled with satisfaction.

As Connie returned to the defendant’s table, where Antonio and the others were waiting, the judge banged his gavel to begin the trial. The hard knock was followed by a command for both parties to step forward. Antonio started to stand up, but Connie held him back with an upraised hand. She squeezed her fists and shut her eyes tight. Then, slowly, she opened them again...and let a smile blossom over her mouth.

“I will serve in your place.”



Suddenly, the wind changed. Lucia blinked a few times and murmured, “... Miss Connie?”

Seeing her freeze up, Uly asked worriedly, “Lucia, what’s wrong? Does something hurt?”

He was probably asking about Carlo Vecchio’s attack. Fortunately, the ground she had flung herself onto had been soft, and she was unharmed. Lucia smiled brightly. “I’m fine. The kind man checked to make sure I wasn’t hurt,” she told him, glancing at Marco, who was watching them silently.

Randolph was glaring at the girl standing in the makeshift court with a terribly stern look on his face. Lucia followed his gaze.

Hazelnut hair and pale green eyes. Standing there so boldly, ignoring the commotion of the spectators, was the same girl Lucia loved like a big sister. But right now, a beautiful, fierce girl with wavy black hair was layered over Miss

Connie—another person whom Lucia loved and respected like an elder sister.

“Didn’t you hear me? Or maybe it amuses you to abuse underage boys? Ah yes, I do believe I’ve heard a rumor to that effect. How terrifying.”

The girl made an exaggerated shivering motion. There was no way a foreigner who had just set foot on the island could have heard a rumor like that, but of course, no one here knew that. Maybe that was why the crowd shrank back at her confident words. She could hear them whispering. “He likes little boys!” “The pervert!” “So that’s the kind of man he is...”

“What?! Ridiculous! No such rumor exists!”

“Perhaps you simply haven’t heard it. In that case, I’d be happy to share it with you right now, in great detail.”

“But I told you—Oh, never mind, just represent the boy if that’s what you want!”

This must be what people call “bluffing,” Lucia thought. Abby had told her that was how you made someone fight on your terms. Apparently, it was a skill all ladies possessed. From there, if you could drive your opponent into a corner and vanquish them, you might finally be accepted as a full-fledged lady. Rudy, who was like her big brother, said she didn’t need to aim quite so high, but Lucia’s dream was to become a magnificent lady. Although it wasn’t going very well so far.

Suddenly, she heard a deep sigh above her head. She looked up to find Randolph Ulster, another big brother to her, pressing his fingers between his eyes like he was holding back a headache.

Meanwhile, Constance—no, Scarlett Castiel—had received permission from the judge to officially serve as Antonio’s representative. She was now consulting with the boy, who seemed unable to process what was happening.

“And all he’s asking for is the medical fees?” Scarlett asked.

“Hmm? Oh, yes, only the medical fees.”

“What about the cost of repairing his boat?”

“Repairs? No, it was just a graze...”

The right gunwale of the Fargo gondola had also been lightly scratched, he said, but they hadn't bothered to fix it.

"Which means Carlo didn't send his boat to be repaired, either, yes?"

"I don't think so. There's a lot of boat accidents around festival time, and the shipwrights can't handle all the work. If you sent your boat in, you wouldn't get it back for a month. Also, I just saw the Vecchio gondola at the pier."

"Are you sure it was the same boat that was in the accident? Don't noble families have more than one boat?"

"The figurehead on the bow is a little bent, so I'm sure it's the same one."

Scarlett narrowed her green eyes and smiled with satisfaction. "I see," she said. Then she met the judge's gaze and asked loudly, "May I make a statement?"

The judge raised his eyebrow slightly before saying, "Go ahead."

"If we are not at fault, then I would like to request a sincere apology from the plaintiff. Is that all right?"

"An apology?"

"Yes. My client has been deeply hurt. If an apology is not possible, we will, of course, give up for the time being. Although, in exchange, we will no doubt be seeing the plaintiff again in court quite soon."

The middle-aged judge must have been very tired of these cases, because without hesitation, he nodded and said, "Request accepted. Carlo Vecchio, do you agree?"

"...Of course, your honor."

Though Carlo looked irritated, he agreed without argument. He probably wanted to make a good impression on the judge. To hide his dissatisfaction, he brought his fist to his mouth and coughed. The bodyguard beside him hurriedly pulled some papers from a satchel and held them up.

"Take a good look at this," Carlo said. "It's the doctor's diagnosis. He says it will take me a month to recover fully. I can't walk without a staff, and when I recall the terror I felt during the accident, I can't even sleep at night. How do

you intend to compensate me?”

He was speaking rapidly and pounding his staff on the ground. His opponent blinked at him.

“I’m very sorry to hear that, but did you really hurt yourself in a boat? Not by tripping over a rock and falling down?”

She was obviously ridiculing the court case from the previous year. The onlookers knew this, of course, and mocking laughter rippled through the crowd. Carlo answered in a rage, “You people are the ones who hit me with your boat!”

“Talk is cheap. What’s your proof?”

Carlo smiled cunningly, as if he had been waiting for this very question.

“I have a witness to the accident. If you refuse to admit your guilt, I will call them to testify.”

“He probably paid them off,” Marco muttered.

“Well, do you admit defeat?” Carlo pressed. Just then, Lucia noticed Scarlett’s smile, like a hawk eyeing its prey.

“Would you mind showing us your gondola?”

“...What?”

“Our boat was scratched in the accident. Obviously, if you didn’t hit us, then the scratch won’t match up with the bow of your boat, correct?”

“A s-scratch...?”

Carlo’s face twitched. Scarlett delivered her follow-up blow in the same light tone.

“Oh, I forgot, your back is injured. By all means, then, wait here. I’ll just run over to the pier and inspect the boat.”

“W-wait!”

Carlo chased frantically after Scarlett as she turned on her heels and strode away. That’s right—he *chased after her*.

As his staff clattered to the ground, she stopped. Then, with a terrifyingly elegant motion, she slowly tilted her head.

“Dear me, you certainly seem fit as a fiddle.”

As realization of his mistake spread over Carlo’s face, Scarlett walked toward him and stepped hard on the staff. Lucia wasn’t sure if it was intentional or a coincidence, but her toes were positioned directly on top of the expensive-looking inlaid jewels.

“You didn’t by chance falsify your diagnosis, did you? Oh, but this is very serious. Perjury is a criminal offense.”

The teenage girl’s harmless, ordinary-looking face bore an awfully sadistic smile. Carlo shivered, evidently terrified by her twisted expression.

Just then, the judge’s wooden gavel banged down.

“That is quite enough,” he said, cutting off Scarlett’s attack. “Carlo Vecchio, your claims appear to be inconsistent. If the inconsistency was intentional, we have a problem. Do you have anything to say in your defense?”

“...N-no. My understanding of the incident appears to have been mistaken.”

“Do you drop your claims?”

“.....Yes.”

“Then apologize to the defendant.”

Carlo scowled in irritation.

“...Hmph. I suppose there was a small misunderstanding on my part. I’ll agree to forgive you for your past rudeness, so you’d do well to forget about this little incident as well.”

The crowd jeered at his obvious lack of shame. But Carlo ignored them.

“I’ve made my apology! You people are satisfied, are you not?” he asked instead.

He looked toward the defendant’s table, where Lucia and the others sat. The teenage girl standing there grinned and, after a pause, gave her answer.

“Are you an idiot?”

Every spectator gasped.

“What...?”

“Can’t you hear? I told you to apologize. What part of your attitude right now is apologetic? If you think you’ll get away with this, then you’re one arrogant piece of work. Fixing that level of stupidity in one lifetime is going to be difficult, so I suggest you start over and try again in your next life.”

The makeshift court fell silent. The onlookers were frozen as Carlo gaped. Marco and Antonio were staring in shock at this girl who had looked so plain and ordinary to them. Ulysses was watching with a puzzled expression, and Randolph was once again pressing his fingers to his forehead.

“Or don’t you know how to apologize? I’ve heard that, in the Far East, people sometimes apologize by cutting off their pinkie. But you’d still have nine fingers left, so what’s the value in that? Let’s see, what would be a better symbol of remorse? An ear? An eye? You only have one nose, so I’ll let you keep that.”

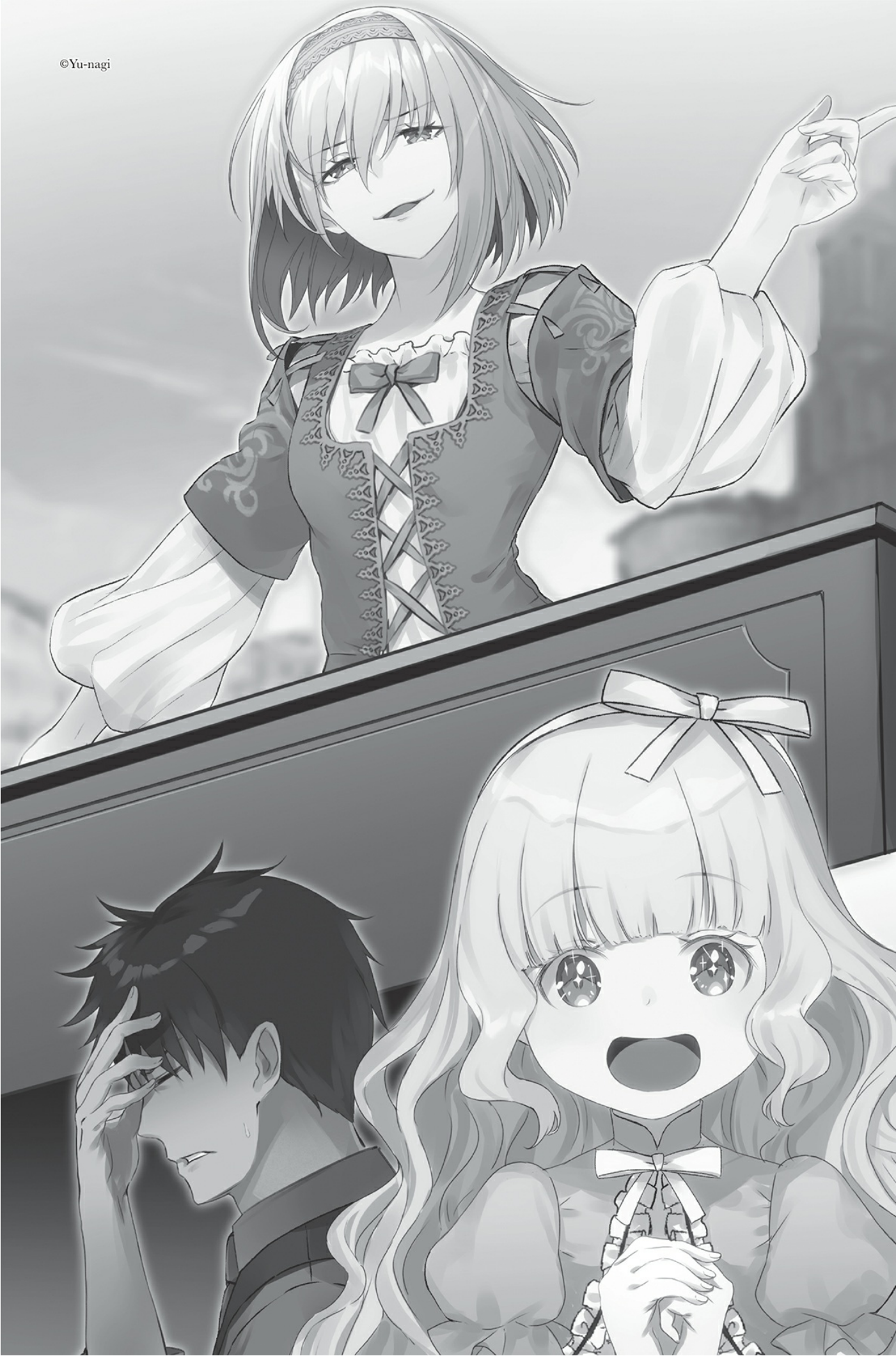
A muffled scream rose from Carlo’s throat.

“Oh, I’m only joking. What good would any of those things do me? Ah, I know. Let’s burn your gondola! After all, that’s what started all this trouble,” she said with a smile. Carlo shuddered.

“Y-you said all I had to do was apologize.”

“That’s right. I’m a deeply merciful woman, and I will forgive you if you apologize.”

Without taking her eyes off Carlo, she called on the court clerk. The man transcribing the proceedings flinched in surprise.



“You’ve recorded our entire conversation, haven’t you?” she asked. “Did I ever say what type of apology I was seeking?”

“A s-sincere apology...,” he replied.

Scarlett smiled with satisfaction.

“Did you hear that, Carlo? You didn’t think a cursory bow of your head would count as an apology, did you? Listen closely. Sincerity always involves sacrifice.”

Lucia could hear Randolph mutter, “What kind of logic is that?” As she watched a delighted Scarlett drive her opponent into a corner, Lucia remembered what Rudy had once told her about people who used this approach.

They’re scammers, he’d said.

“You’re quarreling over trifles!” Carlo spat back. “Sincerity, you say? That’s just semantics! Anyone with common sense can see you’re the one spouting nonsense!”

“Common sense?”

The girl with the deceptively harmless-looking face tilted her head like she was deeply perplexed.

“What matters in a place like this isn’t common sense; it’s rules! And with all due respect, I haven’t broken a single one of the rules that you gentlemen established.”

Her green eyes narrowed slyly.

“If you don’t want to give up that useless little boat of yours, then how about ripping off those tasteless clothes you’re wearing? That is, if you’re prepared for your scrawny old body to become the laughingstock of the island. Well? Which do you prefer? Out of consideration for the bravery you displayed in picking a fight with me, I will allow you to choose.”

Carlo retreated a step. Lucia could see he was unnerved. As he stood there frozen and pale, Scarlett raised her eyebrows crossly.

“If you won’t speak up, I’ll take both!”

“—The gondola! Take the gondola!”

Scarlett grinned. “You wrote that down, I hope?” she said imperiously to the clerk. The poor clerk yelped. The judge, looking exhausted, announced that the trial was over, and he banged his gavel.

When Scarlett returned, she looked Lucia in the eye and smiled her most brilliant smile.

“Remember this, Lucia. Proper ladies crush idiots like that so mercilessly, they’d never dream of interfering with us again.”



**Constance
Grail**

Thanks to her fiancé's job, which would make a typical toxic workplace look like heaven, she was never able to set a wedding date, much less get married as a sixteen-year-old. Turned seventeen this spring, and is seriously planning to raid her fiancé's workplace in the near future. ←new!



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old who's a bully even abroad. Still lives by the motto "What's yours is mine, and what's mine is mine." Plans to claim ownership of the whole world while she's at it, and is currently on a treasure hunt to that end. Just between us, she's actually more excited than anyone about this vacation. ←new!



**Randolph
Ulster**

Thanks to the awesome power of Faris's new queen, His Excellency the Grim Reaper has secured his first real vacation in years. Will most likely be swamped with a backlog of work when he returns, but hasn't broken this news to his fiancée yet. ←new!



Lucia O'Brian

Really wanted to visit Uly sooner but kept having to put it off because the O'Brians' loyal hound said she was "much, much too young for a sleepover" and wouldn't let her go. But it's all good now, because she's going on a trip with Miss Connie and Miss Scarlett, both of whom she adores.



Antonio Fargo

Ulysses's cousin. Fell slightly in love with Lucia when they met but instantly had his heart broken. Has a serious complex about his mean-looking face since the rest of his family is so gorgeous. Also has a pitiful weakness for beautiful people.



Ulysses Faris

Heroine-esque seventh prince, whose evanescent beauty grows ever more perfect with each passing year. Seeing that he was much daintier than even most female students, the teachers at his boarding school decided to double school security.

Marco

Nice young man with a cool attitude. Servant to Antonio but seizes every opportunity to make comments totally inappropriate for someone of his position. Probably the type to carve a person's heart out with a smile.

Carlo Vecchio

Takes the stage radiating the aura of a small-time crook who gets whipped in the first act and does not disappoint.

Sylvia Latué

Woman who might have actually been Cornelia Faris.

Kimberly Smith was visiting the Castiel residence to report on a series of suspected arsons recently causing an outcry in the capital.

“Saint worship, you say?” Adolphus muttered, his elbows resting on his desk and his handsome features mildly distorted by a frown. “What a bother.”

Kimberly agreed. The oil left behind at the site of each fire was the same kind used in the ceremonies of the saint worshippers. As the term “saint worship” suggested, this group viewed Saint Anastasia as their supreme deity rather than the Moirai. Their beliefs blended well with Adelbide’s native religion and consequently attracted more followers than other pagan sects.

“It seems the extremists have rapidly gained strength over the past several months,” she said.

The first fires occurred in unpopulated areas on the city’s outskirts, or in abandoned buildings. But the other day a church had been set aflame. Fortunately, it was put out before causing any major damage, but the scale of the arsons was steadily growing. If rumors spread that the saint worshippers were to blame, a conflict could flare up between religions. Action had to be taken immediately.

“Extremists, eh? I’ll wager someone is inciting them,” said Adolphus.

“One of my people is looking into that possibility,” Kimberly replied.

An image of the young woman she’d hired as her private secretary came to mind. With her fluffy chestnut hair and well-endowed figure, she looked like innocuousness incarnate. But in fact, she had the smarts to coolly evaluate a situation and the guts to act on it. Kimberly liked that. Of course, the girl was an excellent secretary as well.

“By the way,” Kimberly said, glancing at the fruit scattered carelessly over Adolphus’s desk. “Are those lemons?”

“They are.”

“Unusual this time of year, aren’t they?”

Lemons were usually available in Adelbide’s markets in fall and winter.

“I own some land in the south. My gardeners have been coddling the trees in a glass greenhouse for years, but this is the first time we’ve had a harvest.”

Lemons bloom perpetually and bear fruit six months or so after flowering. But flowers don’t form in cold weather, and even if they do, the fruit is small and poor. The fruit on the table was slightly green, but the size and shape looked decent. If Adolphus was growing them in a greenhouse, he must want a summer harvest. Perhaps he’d even developed improved varieties.

“But why lemons?” she asked.

“Because it’s Carnival season.”

“...On El Sol, you mean?”

If Kimberly remembered right, the traditional festival should be taking place just about now. Although she didn’t recall anything about a custom of eating lemons.

“You’ve heard of it?” asked Adolphus.

“I’ve been there.”

“That’s news to me.”

“It was decades ago.”

Adolphus laughed quietly, like he was remembering something. “A young person I’ve taken an interest in is on El Sol now.”

He must have meant Constance Grail. Kimberly had heard about the situation with the seventh prince.

“Don’t you mean you sent her there?”

It wasn’t a bad idea to build up a bank of favors, in consideration of future relations with Faris. That was the thinking behind Kimberly’s question, but Adolphus only smiled.

“And what about the House of Fargo?” he asked in return. “Do you think they plan to use Ulysses Faris in some way?” Kimberly thought for a moment, then

slowly shook her head.

“Unlikely, I think. The current duke has a reputation for being an honest man.”

“And you don’t think his wife’s family will pose any problems?”

She hadn’t expected him to go so far as to ask about the wife. She was silent for a moment.

“...I don’t think so,” she finally said.

“Then why did you pause?”

“Lady Fargo doesn’t come from a noble family. Her father was a scholar of history, I hear.”

“Ah,” Adolphus said with a nod. “Incidentally, why did you visit the Republic?”

“For work, of course.”

Her memory was hazy, but she had been chasing down either an illegal slave trader fleeing the police or a loan shark. She was young then and capable of absurd jobs like that. It would be impossible for her now.

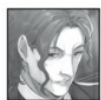
“Must’ve been hard working overseas,” said Adolphus.

“It was, but fortunately the local intelligence service cooperated. I even got to be a tourist for a while as I waited for the return boat. It happened to be Carnival.”

“How fortunate. Did you enjoy the festivities?”

Kimberly thought back on the experience and smiled wryly.

“I’ll just say that *it was a good holiday.*”



Adolphus Castiel

A father with villainous attributes who can't help sounding malicious even when everything he's saying is completely normal. Lined up his hand-raised lemons on his desk so he would have an excuse to brag and felt hurt when everyone ignored them.



Kimberly Smith

Noticed the lemons the instant she entered the room but pretended not to because it seemed like a bother. Ultimately, however, she gave in to the silent pressure from her boss and took the hint, like the paragon of middle management that she is. Appears to have once had a "good holiday" on El Sol.



Kate Lorraine

The soothing type, she's always preferred to be a stagehand rather than a star, and is currently advancing to a central behind-the-scenes role.

In the end, instead of being burned, the Vecchio gondola was brought to the Fargo residence as a war trophy. Scarlett almost lit it on fire then and there out of pure elation. But if she did that, it might make *Carlo* seem like the one being victimized. Even worse, she currently looked like Constance. People in Adelbide were still afraid to mention the Grail girl's name, and it would be a pity if she became a pariah overseas, too. For all those reasons, Connie shouted, "Change!" and ousted Scarlett from her body.

When they pulled up at the Fargo pier, another gondola was already tied there.

"Must be guests," Antonio said, glancing at the boat. Marco nodded.

"That's the Chamber of Commerce boat. They're probably asking for Carnival donations."

"I didn't hear anything about that," Antonio answered.

The visit was unexpected, it seemed. As Marco put down his oar and started mooring the boat, Connie heard people talking by the front gate. Several men were leaving the mansion. Although they were visiting an upper-class home, none of them wore jackets, and some of them even had the sleeves of their plain white shirts rolled sloppily up to their elbows. Their clothes were clearly not those of noblemen. They must have been the visitors from the Chamber of Commerce.

"They look like they've just been to a funeral," Scarlett said. She was right. Their expressions were glum, and they gave off an intimidating air. As Connie stared curiously at them, wondering what they were talking about, the tallest man, and the only one in formal dress, noticed them. Antonio jumped up and said, "Father!"

As Connie watched the man walk toward their boat, she began to understand the conversation from earlier.

He did glow.

He had wavy, soft-looking blond hair and eyes the color of the summer sea. His figure was well-balanced and slim. Basilio Fargo was a ridiculously handsome man whose cool smile suited him perfectly. His cheeks were unfreckled, and his eyes were slightly downturned, all of which made Connie think Antonio must resemble his mother. Basilio was probably in his late thirties. He must have been around the same age as Carlo Vecchio, but his aura couldn't have been more different.

Until the previous year, Basilio had served as a maritime commissioner on the mainland. But on acceding to his title as Duke, he joined the Grand Council. Randolph had told Connie all this on their way to the island. Owing to his background, he was overseeing maritime security around El Sol during the family's stay at their summer residence.

Basilio greeted their party and led them to the drawing room of the mansion. It was an elegant room, not gaudily decorated but clearly furnished with only the best. As soon as Connie and the others were seated on sofas, maids flowed into the room and began preparing tea.

"The men from the Chamber were just telling me about you. I'm sorry to have caused you so much trouble. It all seems to have happened because Judge Donatello got sick of Carlo's obstinance. I know Donatello, and I'll have a word with him later."

"Oh, no, it's really us who should apologize...", Connie said, glancing away in shame as she spoke. Basilio gave her a strange look. It seemed he hadn't yet heard about the theft of the Vecchio gondola. "It's just that I got carried away and..."

After she explained in a nearly inaudible voice what had happened, Basilio burst out in robust laughter. She blinked at him in surprise, and he clapped a hand over his mouth. Then he coughed and said, "Well, we have it now, so I think I'll hang it in the entryway as a decoration."

Connie desperately wanted to tell him not to do that, but she couldn't bring herself to contradict his cool smile. He seemed to be the playful type. Marco had joked around a lot, too. Was the Republic full of cheerful people? Antonio was somewhat moody, but he didn't seem sly or twisted.

After they'd chatted amiably for a while, Basilio called a butler and asked him to give the group a tour of the mansion.

"I wanted to spend more time together, but something unexpected has come up," he said, explaining that he had to go out. Randolph narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Has something happened?" he asked.

"No, nothing important."

"Does it have to do with the visitors who just left? We heard they were from the island's Chamber of Commerce. They didn't seem especially friendly. If there's a problem, I'd like to know about it as soon as possible."

Randolph's tone was marginally polite, but his expression was terrifying. Connie listened to the conversation uneasily.

"Actually, the Chamber has requested I search for some cargo they were supposed to receive last night."

"You mean it's been stolen?"

"No...", Basilio said, hesitating. But he quickly continued, "The merchant vessel it was on seems to have been shipwrecked."



Cotton candy clouds floated against an ultramarine sky. It wasn't sweltering, but the sunlight was too bright to look at. Connie was sitting on a bench on one of the island's public piers, staring absently at the sky, when it occurred to her that it was a perfect day for gelato. By now, Lucia and the others must be enjoying the island's famous frozen treat.

Antonio had told them that the sweet and sour citrus gelato you could get only during the summer was out of this world. After his father left, he had announced somewhat brusquely that he would "treat them in his father's place."

"Have any of you ever tasted gelato? There are some famous shops on the mainland, but nothing compares to the island. The stuff from the White Rose, over by the fountain plaza, has pieces of frozen fruit in it. I know the owner, and

I wouldn't mind taking you there," he said.

Connie and Lucia exchanged excited glances, but then Lucia let out a startled "Oh," clapped her hand over her mouth, and said, "But, Miss Connie, don't you have plans with Mr. Randolph?"

"Oh dear!" Connie blurted out. She'd forgotten something very important.

"Where are you going?" Antonio asked.

"Fanoom Shrine," she answered solemnly.

"The shrine? But I thought you worshipped the Moirai in Adelbide. What would someone from another religion possibly want to do there?"

Connie thought for a moment, then answered, "You might say we're making a delivery."

And so Connie and Randolph were now waiting for a taxi boat, called a vaporette, outside Il Laza Cathedral, the closest boarding pier to the Fargo estate. The shrine they were visiting was on a smaller island called Monte just off the coast of El Sol, so they had to go by boat.

"Gelato...," Connie murmured yet again. Randolph, who was standing beside the bench rather than sitting on it, glanced at her.

Presently, a paddle steamer approached, sending up sprays of water. This must have been the vaporette. It was somewhat larger than a gondola. It probably couldn't fit down the narrower canals, but it could carry loads of people and cargo.

Connie glanced around the inside of the boat. There weren't many other passengers. Maybe because the route didn't pass any tourist spots, the only people on board were a few men who looked like locals and an older woman wearing a cloak with the hood pulled up. They had to pay when they boarded, so they told the wheelsman where they were going and handed him some coins. When he saw Connie looking for an empty seat, Randolph took her hand and sat her down next to him.

"Hey." Once the boat started moving, the man in the row ahead called out to them, craning his neck around to see. "Aren't you the girl who gave Carlo

Vecchio a thrashing earlier?”

“What?”

“You know, at the courthouse!”

“...Huh?”

Before Connie knew what was happening, another man said, “You’re right, it is her! You were incredible!”

Another chimed in, “I was there!” and a fourth added, “So was I!” Suddenly the boat was full of noisy chatter.

“I thought you were a ferocious young woman, but now that I see you here, you seem so ordinary. Almost like a different person.”

“Ha-ha-ha...,” Connie laughed dryly. She really was a different person. Suddenly one of the men lowered his voice.

“But you know, that runt Carlo’s one thing, but you don’t want to make Gregorio Vecchio angry.”

“...Gregorio?”

“Carlo’s old man. We islanders don’t know much about it, but the fellows who commute to the mainland say he’s far more arrogant than his son—that he’s a cruel man who will do anything to get what he wants. Rumor has it he made some failed investments and nearly went bankrupt, and now he’s involved in some real nasty business.”

This caught the attention of another man, who asked, “What do you mean, ‘nasty business’?”

“Smuggling. The Vecchios have run a trading company since the grandfather’s generation, you know.”

The conversation was way over Connie’s head by now and beginning to heat up among the locals.

“That reminds me, a merchant ship was wrecked near the port yesterday.”

“I heard about that! But why would a ship sink when the seas were calm?”

“I heard from the lighthouse keeper that it was one of Gregorio’s company

boats. Word is it was old and he didn't keep up with repairs. Wonder if there was some kind of problem with the boat."

"Or maybe he had some shady cargo on board."

A few men chuckled, but one shook his head.

"No, it was a commission from the Chamber of Commerce, I'm sure of it. The old folks at the Chamber were white as a sheet this morning. They wouldn't say what was on board, but at this time of year, it had to be something for Carnival. They should've left it to the Star like they always do, but no, they had to go with Gregorio Vecchio this year..."

Star? Connie's ears perked up at the word.

"Excuse me, but what do you mean by the 'Star'?" she asked, butting into the conversation. The men exchanged surprised glances.

"The Star? Oh, that's what people call Fanoom Shrine. It wasn't a noble family or a man of the cloth who built that place, you know; it was a merchant. They say he was a foreigner who wanted to show his gratitude to the Republic by buying the whole island with his own money and building that shrine. A true saint."

"There's no statue of him like there is of the Blind Saint, so fewer people know about him. Anyhow, that's why the shrine has connections to the mainland Chamber of Commerce. Purchases related to the festival usually go through the shrine."

"...But why is the shrine called the 'Star'?" Connie asked. The man who had just been speaking scratched his head awkwardly.

"Well, it's always been that way. I wonder why. Any of you fellows know?"

"It's got to do with when Faris was an empire, doesn't it?"

"No, it was after the empire broke up. Something about an immigrant."

"Oh, that's right."

Connie blinked in confusion, and one of the men volunteered to explain. Originally, he said, Faris grew by invading other kingdoms and tribes. When the rebel army broke up the empire, many people fled. Some came to Soldita, and

Fanoom Shrine was their port of arrival. By absorbing the culture and knowledge of these immigrants, the Republic was able to enter an age of advancement.

“The sovereign at the time said it like this.”

It's not quite as bright as the moon or the sun, but like the pole star, it is always there, showing us our way forward.

“From then on, the people of the island began calling the shrine the Star.”

“Oh, how interesting...,” Connie said. She wondered if the Star had anything to do with Cornelia’s starry crown. She couldn’t tell from what she’d heard so far. She was lost in thought, her finger on her lips, when Randolph said her name. She looked up. His expressionless, intimidating face—shrewd or awkward, she was never sure—was staring down at her.

“You’re hiding something, aren’t you.”

It wasn’t a question so much as an announcement. Connie flinched. The truth was, she hadn’t told Randolph about the starry crown. Scarlett had sworn her to silence, saying Randolph would probably be against it, and even if he wasn’t, it would be a pain if he got involved. Connie glanced at Scarlett. Her partner in crime shook her head vigorously.

“Constance?”

Although his tone was comforting, for some reason it felt like she was slowly being cornered. Was she imagining things?

“Uh...um, I can’t talk about it, um, in front of other people.”

“Then make sure you tell me later. When we’re alone.”

She wasn’t imagining things. She really was being cornered. Connie looked pleadingly up at Scarlett, but Scarlett simply turned away.

Oblivious to Connie’s inner turmoil, the boat paddled placidly along. Soon it entered the Canal Grande in the center of the city. Ahead of them she saw a semicircular bridge, the famous Mezzaluna Pier.

“What are those?” Connie asked.

Gondolas were stopped under the bridge. Quite a lot of them, too. Each one was shaded by black awnings, so she couldn't see inside. As she craned her neck at the strange site, one of the other passengers explained, "They're for secret trysts. See how those shades make a kind of private room? Couples use them for illicit affairs, because no one can see who's inside."

"S-secret trysts...?"

Connie's voice came out as a high-pitched squeak. If people conducted their illicit affairs that brazenly, the moral fabric of this island really must be questionable!

"And so many of them... What shameless behavior..."

"Honestly, Constance, that can't really be what's going on," Randolph said.

"Smart fellow," the man noted, gripping his stomach as he laughed. So they were teasing her.

"Those gondolas do get used for love affairs, but not in such conspicuous places. These ones are saving spots for the nobles. No one's inside right now."

"Saving spots?"

"Yes. Have you heard of the Muro di Luche?"

The phrase sounded vaguely familiar. As Connie puzzled over it, Scarlett sighed with exasperation.

"Marco told you, remember? It's the grand finale of the masked ball, at Mezzaluna Pier."

"Oh, the firecracker show!" Connie exclaimed.

"Yes." The man nodded. "The streets are always packed during the show, and this is a prized spot for viewing. Of course, only rich merchants and nobles can afford their own private gondola."

As she listened, a question popped into Connie's head.

"Won't someone steal the boats if they're not guarded?"

The man had said these boats were unoccupied. Gondolas were powered by people, not engines. They were probably anchored in place, but that was only

to keep them from moving. If someone wanted to pull up the anchor and take the boat, they could easily do so.

“The forcolas are locked,” he said simply, pointing to a form protruding from the right side of the boats, covered with a sheath.

“The water around here is deep, so the oars don’t touch the bottom. When the gondoliers row, they rest their oar on that rowlock as they steer. If they didn’t, the boats would tip over. Since the forcolas—that is, the rowlocks—are custom-made, depending on the size, weight, and slant of the boats, they’re not interchangeable. Think of them as the heart of the boat. When the boats are anchored, the forcolas are covered with those special sheaths so they can’t be used. You can’t see from here, but they’re locked with keys so that if someone tries to take them off, the forcola itself would break.”

“Oh, I see,” Connie murmured, impressed by all the craftsmanship involved. Just then, someone groaned in disgust.

“Look, up on top of the bridge! It’s Gregorio Vecchio!”

Connie looked up to see two men walking together on the bridge. One was a well-dressed man in the prime of life, and the other was wearing a cape. Unfortunately, the sun was in her eyes, so she couldn’t see their faces.

“Scoping out the best spots for the show, I reckon. The other one isn’t an islander,” the man said.

“Probably a new bodyguard or attendant. Staff’s always changing in that house.”

As the boat approached the bridge, the two men came into focus. The well-dressed man had ivory hair like Carlo. Connie figured he must have his son’s high-strung expression as well. Suddenly, as the boat passed under the bridge, a shiver ran down her back. She looked up. Gregorio Vecchio was staring blankly down at them.

He saw us.

No sooner had the thought occurred to her than the boat was past the arched stone bridge.

“That man had a nasty look in his eyes,” Scarlett said, glaring back at Gregorio’s quickly shrinking form. Connie agreed. She didn’t know if he’d really been looking at her, but his gaze had been terribly cold.

The boat made its rounds of the piers, dropping off a passenger or two at each one. Eventually, the only ones left were Connie, Randolph, and the old woman in the ash-colored robe with the hood pulled low.

“Oh, Randolph, look! There’s Santa Bea Temple. I read that, in the past, trials were held there instead of at Tharu Charitable Hospital.”

The same chapter of Sena Rilifarco’s travelogue that described trial by combat had mentioned Santa Bea Temple. Connie had the book with her on the boat, and since she had nothing better to do, she was using it like a guidebook to search for historic buildings still standing. This turned out to be surprisingly entertaining.

“...The Republic really is a tolerant kingdom when it comes to religion,” she mumbled, slightly taken aback. Adelbide didn’t forbid the practice of other religions, but almost all the religious sites in that country were churches dedicated to the Moirai, making this a new experience for her.

Soldita was a marine republic dependent on trade and tourism. It prided itself on freedom of religion and adherence to the law. Although the country was represented by a sovereign, it was famous for having a political system that divided power between the sovereign and the Grand Council. Commoners were allowed to serve on the council, and the focus on social status was said to be less acute than in Adelbide and Faris. Maybe that explained why Marco seemed so at ease around Antonio, and Antonio could interact with Ulysses without reserve.

In response to her comment about religious tolerance, Randolph nodded.

“The law of the land deems religious oppression a serious crime, whatever the reason,” he explained. “I heard it was put on the books after the Faris Empire dissolved, and I’m guessing the influx of refugees whose homes were destroyed by the former empire had something to do with it. The tradition of religious freedom here is said to date back to that era.”

“Yes, they even had Il Rosso guarding against religious persecution and

discrimination back then, I believe,” Connie added.

She had read about Il Rosso. Although the system no longer existed, in the past the private investigative force had operated under the direct control of the sovereign, gaining its name from the red capes the officers wore while on duty. It was essentially the equivalent of a modern secret service.

“They were like the secret police, I suppose.” Randolph said.

The old woman, who had been listening silently to their conversation up to this point, placed a finger over her mouth.

“Be careful. Il Rosso don’t like to be gossiped about,” she said.

“...Huh?”

Connie was surprised by this sudden outburst from a passenger who until now had been silent as a stone, and equally surprised by what she said.

“Wh-what? B-but I thought Il Rosso didn’t exist anymore.”

“Oh, not officially. They’re an immoral entity, you see. But in these parts, Il Rosso still know everything about everyone, even babes still in diapers. They say if you do something bad, Il Rosso will come for you.”

The woman cackled hoarsely. Connie couldn’t see her face behind the hood but found herself thinking of the storybook witches of her childhood.

She looked tensely up at Randolph. Even he seemed to be at a loss.

The strange mood persisted as the boat continued toward its island destination. Monte looked to Connie more like a gigantic rock than an island. Sheer cliffs surrounded it, and at the very top was the stone shrine. Not far from the boat landing, stairs had been cut into the cliff. On either side of the gate at the bottom of the stairs stood two guards covered from head to toe in plate armor.

Each held a long spear.

When the boat arrived at the landing, one of the guards walked over to it.

“Visitor’s permit,” he barked.

Connie pulled a rolled-up letter from her purse and handed it to the armored

guard. Because Fanoom Shrine was a religious site, tourist visits were generally forbidden. Those with a strong desire to see it had to apply in advance, and only those who passed a strict screening received permission.

“You may enter,” the guard said after checking the form. He then opened the gate.

Connie was about to start climbing the stairs when she had an urge to look behind her. The boat was still there, but the old woman had vanished.

The stone stairs were steeper than Connie had realized. With each step upward, the meeting point of the deep blue sky and the ultramarine ocean blurred. By the time she’d reached the top, she was panting. She planted her hands on her knees and tried to catch her breath.

“Constance, I’d like to continue our earlier conversation,” Randolph said. He must be built differently from her, because his breathing was as calm as always.

“Our earlier c-conversation?”

“Yes, we were talking on the boat about the Star. What are you hiding? No one else is here, so you should feel at ease to speak.”

“Um, well, it’s just...”

She glanced around nervously, searching for Scarlett. For some reason, the other girl was nowhere to be seen. She must have wandered off somewhere.

“Constance,” Randolph said in a terribly calm voice. Connie knew in her bones that this calmness was more frightening than any outward fury. “Did you know there’s a place selling skewered giant clams near the pier by the church?”

What did that have to do with anything?

“Skewered...clams?”

“Yes. I hear they use the morning’s haul, so it’s extremely fresh. And the sauce is supposed to be outstanding.”

“Fresh clams...and outstanding sauce...?”

“Yes. And at the fountain plaza, they sell fried bite-sized pieces of whitefish marinated in herbs, and bread stuffed with cream and fruit.”

“Fish...and bread...?”

Randolph nodded solemnly.

“Of course, there’s also the gelato at the White Rose,” he added.

Connie was at a loss for words.

“Would you like to try some of those things?”

“O-of course I would...!”

She clenched her fists and nodded. Randolph frowned sadly.

“Ah, but I don’t know what to do. I’m so worried about whatever you’re hiding that I don’t feel much like going out myself. I think I’ll feel up to it once my mind’s at ease, though.”

It would take someone quite extraordinary indeed to keep silent in the face of such an anxious expression.

“I see, so she’s searching for Cornelia Faris’s starry crown.”

“I can’t believe you let him seduce you with an offer of food!” Scarlett fumed, her fists trembling in fury. Connie had given up the information with little resistance. But since Scarlett had been missing at the critical moment, she couldn’t very well blame Connie.

“By the way, the Duke and Duchess Fargo seem very knowledgeable about history,” said Randolph. “Shall we ask them about it when we return?”

Connie gave him a puzzled look. According to Lady Aliénore, Cornelia’s starry crown gave its possessor the power to “lay hold of the world.” She hadn’t expected Randolph to like that idea very much, and now she felt almost let down.

The thought must have shown on her face, because Randolph shrugged.

“I don’t think we’ll have any problems this time,” he said.

“What? How do you know that?”

“What could be dangerous about something a mother wants to give her daughter?”

“...Maybe you’re right.”

He did have a point. Even Scarlett was peering at him in surprise.

“Is that why you wanted to visit the shrine?” he asked. She shook her head.

“I did wonder if we’d find a clue of some sort here. But mostly I wanted to see where Lady Aliénore grew up.”

Fanoom Shrine had taken Aliénore in after both her parents died in an epidemic.

“Also, Sir Adolphus himself requested that I come.”

She stroked the small glass bottle in her purse. She still corresponded regularly with the extraordinarily handsome middle-aged duke and had told him quite a while back about her plans to visit El Sol. That was when he had entrusted her with Aliénore’s ashes.

He seemed to regret that he had never allowed his wife to visit her native island. In a letter he sent Connie before her departure, he asked her to “give my greetings to Lady Berta, the head priestess.” That, apparently, was the name of the woman who had taken on the role of Aliénore’s mother.

The limestone shrine was forbidding. A dense grove of trees surrounded it, so that Connie felt she was in the middle of a forest. Pale purple flowers waved like ears of rice beside the path.

“Lemon trees!” Scarlett exclaimed suddenly. Ahead of them was a cluster of trees with glossy green leaves.

“Lemon trees?”

“Yes. They bear fruit from winter to spring, I think. My mother loved lemonade. And she said she often played in the forest.”

“Really? Randolph, would it be all right if we walked around here?”

“Yes, you’ve still got some time before your appointment, so I don’t think a little detour would hurt.”

They had arranged a tour of the shrine, but since they weren’t yet familiar with the taxi system, they’d taken an early boat.

“My mother said she was good at climbing trees. Although once she tussled with a sea eagle that had claimed this area as its territory, and she fell. Luckily, she got caught in the branches and wasn’t badly hurt. I wonder if that was the tree.”

“It sounds like Aliénore was a surprisingly wild little girl...,” Connie said.

Hadn’t Scarlett said her mother once punched the Duke of Castiel? Connie frowned nervously, but Scarlett was smiling.

As they walked on, Randolph suddenly muttered, “There’s something here.” Connie followed his gaze and saw a stone marker hidden among the trees.

“...A gravestone?”

It did look like someone’s grave. As she walked toward the sun-dappled granite marker, she saw that the words “Sena Rilifarco” were engraved on it.

“I can’t believe it,” she blurted out. “It says Sena Rilifarco.”

Unless there was another person with the exact same name, this was the grave of the man who had written her travelogue.

“Didn’t the man on the boat say that a merchant built this shrine?” Scarlett pointed out.

“But it’s such an odd coincidence...”

Just then, someone called to them.

“Are you lost?”

Connie froze. Looking over her shoulder, she saw the old woman with the hood standing in the woods. Randolph’s eyes widened slightly in surprise.

“Aren’t you the woman who...”

“...was on the boat?” Connie asked, finishing his sentence. The woman’s small form and hoarse voice were unmistakable.

“You can’t possibly be acquaintances of the man in that grave, can you?”

“What?”

“I know you heard me. See the name written on the gravestone? Sena

Rilifarco. He was an upstart—a very wealthy merchant who brought the sovereign rare goods from foreign lands. The fellows on that boat said he was like a saint who gave his own money to build this shrine, but in fact the opposite is true. It was all an act to stop people from hating him for making too much money.”

Connie blinked in surprise. According to the men on the boat, Sena Rilifarco was a pious and good man, but now she wasn’t so sure.

“...Why is his grave out here?” Randolph asked, glancing around. They were deep in the woods without so much as a paved road nearby. No one would find this place unless they were lost.

“It was his dying wish. Perhaps he didn’t want anyone to visit his grave,” the woman said. Connie tilted her head in confusion, and the woman laughed sarcastically.

“Legend has it Sena Rilifarco was an awful misanthrope. He was single his whole life, of course. After his death, the kingdom confiscated most of his huge fortune, but some was transferred to his apprentices, as his will instructed. This shrine was among the things the apprentices got.”

“You’re very knowledgeable on the subject.”

“That’s because I’m a descendent of one of the apprentices.”

The old woman turned toward Randolph and Connie.

“We haven’t introduced ourselves, have we? I’m Berta Neuen.”

She pushed her hood back, releasing a long ponytail of black hair. A pair of intense, dark brown eyes pierced Connie. The woman’s exposed face was quite a bit younger—and more beautiful—than Connie had expected.

She remembered Adolphus’s letter.

Give my greetings to Lady Berta.

“Are you Aliénore’s...?” Connie began. But that would make her close to fifty, and she didn’t look anywhere near that age. True, she acted like an older woman, but her features were firm, without any sign of wrinkles or age spots. This ageless beauty was just another way she was like a witch.

Berta narrowed her eyes slightly at Connie's unfinished question.

"...I did once take in a child whose parents had died. It was decades ago. I have nothing to do with her anymore."

Her words didn't give Connie much to work with. Maybe this wasn't Aliénore's surrogate mother after all. She was uncertain, but she forged ahead anyway.

"Um, actually, I have been entrusted by the Duke of Castiel with her ashes."

Berta frowned crossly and clicked her tongue.

"What an obstinate boy he is."

"O-obstinate...?"

"It's been over ten years since he first wrote to me saying he wanted to send Aliénore's ashes. Of course I said no. But no matter how many times I turned him down, he kept on sending the same letter like nothing had happened."



“He did?”

“For a few years, I thought he’d stopped, but recently he’s started up again, worse than ever. He even submitted a request to tour the shrine under a false name. I recently told him that if he didn’t stop, I’d make it into a diplomatic issue. I never imagined he’d make use of a little girl on holiday like you. You’re going to take responsibility, I hope?”

Connie hadn’t known any of this. She covered her face with her hands.

“He tr-tricked me...”

The duke really was obstinate. So obstinate, it was a little scary, in fact. Scarlett, on the other hand, nodded like she was impressed and said, “That sounds like my father.” Like father, like daughter. As Connie was wondering what to do, Berta held out her hand.

“What do you need?” Connie asked.

“Why, your entrance fee, of course!” Berta said.

“My entrance fee?! I thought the processing fee I submitted with my application covered that...”

“That was the shrine entrance fee. Nowhere does it say you are allowed to enter the forest.”

“That’s ridiculous,” Connie muttered, but since she didn’t want to get into a fight, she placed a few coins in Berta’s palm. Berta glanced down at them, then pushed her hand farther toward Connie.

“What now...?”

“I told you about Sena Rilifarco, didn’t I? You haven’t paid the information fee. Or the nuisance fee. That boy has run up a bill.”

A half-strangled cry escaped from Connie’s throat.

“I thought sh-shrines were supposed to practice virtuous poverty!”

“Shrines, maybe. But the Neuen family motto is money makes right. The inheritance from Rilifarco hundreds of years ago is long gone. Finances here are tight.”

As Connie groaned, Randolph—who until now had been listening silently—placed his hand soothingly on her head. “Here,” he said, handing a silver coin to Berta. She smiled with satisfaction and tucked it into her bosom so fast Connie hardly caught the movement. It was the textbook gesture of a miser.

“By the way, you were asking about the Star on the boat, weren’t you?” she said, her mood suddenly improved. “Was there a reason?” As Connie hesitated over how to answer, Randolph spoke up.

“She seems to have heard from someone in the Castiel family that Cornelia Faris’s starry crown is somewhere on El Sol. Do you know anything about it, priestess?”

Berta’s smile froze, and her eyes narrowed.

“From the Castiels, eh? I don’t know which Castiel it was, but let me give you some friendly advice. If you think you’re on a treasure hunt, forget about it.”

She spit out her next words.

“That crown...is a curse.”



Jets of water flew out from a huge fountain, sparkling in the sunlight. This was Fortuna Park, and it was filled with people. The fountain plaza itself was a famous tourist attraction, but the shops with dark red awnings lining either side were popular with tourists and locals alike. The gelato from the White Rose was especially beloved, and maybe because it was such a sunny day, the line outside never dwindled.

Lucia and Marco were standing politely at the end of the line. Lucia’s good breeding made her stand out, but she had volunteered for the job, and she was clearly enjoying herself. Antonio and Ulysses had been entrusted with finding a place to sit and were perched on the edge of the fountain, waiting for the other two to return.

“...I don’t see the point of lining up in this heat,” Antonio complained. “I know the owner, after all. If I asked, he would’ve sent out gelato for all of us without the wait.”

“Lucia said she enjoys waiting in line. We don’t have much chance to do things like that, after all,” Ulysses said with a grin. Antonio blushed at his brilliant smile and glanced away, unable to look straight at it. Then he worked up the nerve to ask something he’d been wondering about.

“H-have you two been friends for a long time?”

He was gazing at Lucia’s fluffy golden hair as she stood in line for gelato.

“Me and Lucia? No...not all that long. We met last summer.”

“That’s less than a year!”

Ulysses flinched. Antonio realized he’d been shouting and coughed.

“It’s just that you two get along so well, I thought you must be old friends.”

“I’m not sure, but I feel like time doesn’t have much to do with that kind of connection. The important thing is what you’ve been through together.”

“Oof...,” Antonio said, placing his hand over his heart. “D-did you tell her you liked her first?”

Ulysses looked momentarily confused, then said, “Oh, we’re not together. I’m not sure how to describe it. She’s like my teacher.”

“Your teacher?”

“Yeah. I’m still a poor apprentice, though.”

As Antonio was trying to figure out what he meant, footsteps pattered toward them. It was Lucia, holding gelatos in both hands. Marco had chosen the flavors.

“You’ll have to guess which one you got by tasting it!” she said, handing them over.

“Marco, don’t tell me you forgot which one is which...,” said Antonio. Marco quickly glanced away. Antonio’s gelato looked like milk with maple syrup on it, and the cool creaminess melted on his tongue, leaving a light scent and sweet flavor. Probably almond. His favorite.

“Lucia?” Ulysses asked suspiciously, snapping Antonio out of his reverie. Lucia was staring past the fountain, her brow furrowed. She was looking toward Mille Street.

Jolted by Ulysses's voice, she looked back at the others. "I'm fine," she said, shaking her head. "Oh no, it's melting!"

With that, she hurriedly began eating her honey-colored gelato. A second later, her eyes went wide.

"This is delicious...! It's sweet and tart and refreshing but also very flavorful! Which did you get, Uly?"

The prince was staring fixedly at his pale green gelato.

"Let's see...maybe nuts? It's a bit odd, but it's sweet. I like it. Want a taste?"

"Can I, really?!"

"Of course."

He held his gelato up to her mouth. She opened wide, her eyes sparkling.

"Hey, that's improper!" Antonio squeaked, evidently upset.

Ulysses stared at him, not understanding.

"What, you want some, too?"

"What, me, eat that...?"

"Yes. Here you go."

Ulysses held out his gelato. Antonio froze, his face beet red. Lucia said, "It's really good!" but he seemed unable to hear her. Marco smiled wryly.

"I'm sorry, Your Highness. My young master is still rather inexperienced in these matters."

"Um, I don't really understand, but he's not sick, is he?"

"No, just slightly self-conscious."

"I hope that's all it is...," Ulysses said, looking worriedly at the frozen Antonio. "...No, I think he must feel sick. Lucia, what do you—Lucia?"

She had half risen from the fountain's edge and was looking around with a vaguely tense expression.

"What's wrong?" he asked.

Her eyes widened, then, noticing Ulysses, she smiled brightly and sat down again like nothing had happened.

“I’m sure I’m just imagining things.”

“Really?”

“Yes. But I’m a little worried about Antonio. I think we should go, Uly.”

“Um, okay...”

“Also,” she said, looking past the fountain again. “I’ve been sensing someone looking at us in the most awful way.”



By the time Connie and Randolph got back to the mansion after their startling encounter with Lady Berta, it was after dark.

“She never did take the ashes,” Connie muttered, slumping her shoulders. She hadn’t even managed to show Berta the glass jar that contained them.

As she hung her head, Randolph said soothingly, “The head priestess and the Duke of Castiel are both a handful. They’re not easy people to deal with.”

Sensing the mood wasn’t right for it, Connie and Randolph had politely turned down their promised tour of the shrine. Connie hadn’t been able to withstand Berta’s silent pressure.

After dinner, Lucia and the other children, who had gotten back ahead of them, went to their bedrooms while Connie and Randolph were invited to the drawing room.

“Would you like a little something sweet after dinner?” asked Antonio’s mother, Daniella. She had curly, dark brown hair and long, narrow eyes of the same color. Her cheeks were freckled. With her thin build and stern features, she looked quite a lot like Antonio.

“My husband should be home soon,” she said.

Sure enough, less than half an hour later, Basilio Fargo returned. Weariness shadowed his handsome face, and a deep wrinkle divided his brow. Connie guessed he hadn’t found the freight he was searching for. That was when

Randolph's workaholic nature reared its head.

"It seems you haven't found the missing freight," he said.

"Not even a trace, I'm afraid."

With a sigh, Basilio pulled out a map of the ocean and spread it on the table. Randolph rose from the sofa and walked over to him.

"Considering the currents this time of year," said Basilio, "the flotsam should have washed ashore near Azara Cathedral."

"But it wasn't there? Odd indeed. Could seasonal winds have blown it off course?"

"No, the weather has been calm the past few days..."

Soon they were deep in the weeds, and Connie was no longer able to follow. Randolph's expression was as blank as ever, but to Connie, he somehow looked more animated than usual.

"...I think it's likely the freight has already sunk to the bottom of the sea," Basilio continued. "The water around here is surprisingly deep. Finding it will be near impossible."

"So what was in the cargo?"

They were already talking like old friends.

"I heard it was disposable masks for tourists. True, they're essential for Carnival, but that would hardly bring the men at the Chamber to tears. Between us, there are rumors of embezzlement going around."

"I see. That makes me all the more curious about the content of that freight."

"I have my staff looking into it as we speak."

"Let me know if I can help you with anything," Randolph said. His tone was dispassionate as usual, but Connie thought she saw his clear blue eyes sparkle. What a hopeless workaholic. *He's beyond treatment*, she thought, sighing. Daniella, misunderstanding the situation, lowered her brows apologetically.

"I'm sorry about Basilio."

"But why?"

“For stealing away such a sweet young woman’s companion. He has a habit of forgetting his surroundings. I’ll have a word with him about it now.”

“No, Lady Daniella, please don’t worry...!” Connie said, stopping her. “Um, so they haven’t found the freight yet?”

“No,” she answered, frowning slightly. “Basilio is very good at reading the currents. If he hasn’t found it yet, it surely must have sunk.”

Connie was about to agree when a thought suddenly struck her.

“You don’t think someone might have found it first and stolen it?”

Daniella shook her head.

“Travel by carriage isn’t possible on the island, so freight must be carried by hand. The area around the cathedral is crowded, and something like that would attract attention. My husband has probably asked around for information. If no one witnessed it being taken, it’s not very likely it happened.”

“I see. But what if they put it on another boat?”

“Transporting freight on ferries is generally prohibited, and you need permission to transport goods on the paddle steamers. There are set shipping lanes, and if someone was using them without permission, it would be reported immediately.”

“Oh...”

“Besides, I don’t think there would be much value in stealing that cargo,” Scarlett interjected.

That was true—what would anyone do with a load of tourist masks?

“You know so much about the island, Lady Daniella,” Connie said.

“I grew up here,” she replied with a smile. It seemed her father and Basilio’s father were old friends. “Our family was close with the Fargos. Basilio’s growth spurt came rather late, so everyone used to think he was a girl. His eyes were as clear as a lake in winter, and his lips were like a dew-washed rose. When I was young, I thought of him as a fairy who only came out in the summer. He was a bit like His Highness Ulysses, I suppose.”

“He must have been an adorable child...!” Connie agreed enthusiastically, thinking of Basilio’s handsome face. They talked about this for a while, then Daniella’s face fell.

“I heard about what happened with Carlo,” she said.

“Oh no, I’m sorry I stirred up so much trouble...”

The Vecchio gondola, incidentally, was still hanging in the hall like a war trophy. Connie wished they would take it down, because every time she passed it, she felt pangs of guilt.

“I’m sorry you got pulled into this,” said Daniella. “Carlo is inept, but he’s not a bad man underneath it all.”

“...Oh?” Connie asked. Daniella’s tone made it sound as if she knew him well.

“We were childhood friends,” she explained. “The three of us even used to play together... My father was a historian, and in the summers he would tutor Carlo and Basilio.”

Then when did Carlo and Basilio fall out? Connie wondered. Antonio had said it was a long time ago, but there must have been some reason.

She was curious, but she knew she shouldn’t pry too much. That was when she remembered that Randolph had said Daniella was knowledgeable about history. Connie had wondered why, but it made sense if the duchess’s father was a historian.

“I was wondering, Lady Daniella, do you know about Sena Rilifarco?” she asked excitedly.

“Sena? You mean the merchant from the days of Lorenzo Latué?”

“Yes! Is he very famous?”

In Adelbide, he was virtually unknown.

“I don’t know about on the mainland, but here on the island, I’d say more people know about him than don’t. He was the first foreign merchant to personally serve the sovereign. He had absolute confidence in his eye for quality and never left the buying up to others, so he was constantly traveling both inside and outside the country. But where did you hear of him,

Constance?”

“I have a travelogue he wrote.”

“A travelogue?”

Daniella looked intrigued, so Connie went to her room to fetch the book.

“*A Lost Man’s Compass*? I knew he wrote several books, but I didn’t know one was a travelogue.”

She flipped through the pages with great interest. Connie was about to offer to lend it to her when Scarlett muttered, “...No one would question a foreign trader for traveling, now would they? Sounds like the perfect cover for a member of Il Rosso.”

“Il Rosso?” Connie echoed suspiciously.

“Oh, you know about that?” Daniella asked, looking up from the book.

“About what?”

“Sena Rilifarco was the sovereign’s private trader in the eyes of the public, but they say that, in truth, he carried out his employer’s orders as a member of Il Rosso.”

“Really...?”

“Actually, recent studies have turned up contradictions in the early purchase records of his trading company—but this conversation must bore you.”

Noticing Connie’s open-mouthed stare, Daniella blushed and looked down, suddenly aware she was off on a tangent.

“It’s not b-boring at all,” said Connie. “I’m just surprised by how much you know!”

“It’s just a hobby. I became interested in history because of my father. But I heard most of what I just told you from Lady Berta. She’s the well-informed one.”

Berta? Connie blinked in surprise.

“Do you mean Berta Neuen? The head priestess of Fanoom Shrine?”

“Yes. She’s more a scholar than a hobbyist, though. She often invites learned people from the mainland to the island for discussions. I’ve heard she became a priestess at the shrine because she wanted to devote herself to her studies. Oh, I have an idea. There’s a large collection of books by Sena Rilifarco in the shrine’s underground library. Maybe you should ask if they know anything about your travelogue.”

Since Sena founded the shrine, it made sense that they would have all his books.

“Do you go to the shrine often, Lady Daniella?”

“Oh, no, I see Berta at our social club.”

“Your social club?”

Connie blinked in surprise.

“Don’t you have social clubs in Adelbide?” Daniella asked in return.

“We do, but...”

Connie’s understanding was that social clubs were places for the upper classes to gather information and make connections. Men rode horses and hunted while women did embroidery. That sort of thing. The pecking order was determined by class, and the membership fees were outrageous, so the Grail family had little to do with them. Daniella seemed surprised to hear this.

“Here they are simply gatherings for hobbyists. Sometimes all we do is drink tea and chat. Berta is the president of our club. The Neuens are one of the older noble families on the island. Didn’t you know that?”

Connie gaped at her. So Berta Neuen was a noble!

“I was certain she was just an ordinary miser.”

Daniella’s eyes widened for a moment. Then she laughed.

“She’s not a docile woman, that’s for certain. If you’d like, why don’t you join me at our next club meeting?”

“I-I’m not very good at history...”

“Oh, that’s not a problem. All we do is gossip.”

“Really?”

“Yes. We meet at the best coffeehouse on the island and complain about our lives while we eat delicious sweets. Doesn’t that sound fun?”

She lowered her voice, like she was telling Connie an important secret. “It’s called Lady’s Holiday.”

The next morning, Connie woke to strong sunlight pouring in through a crack in the curtains. She scowled, groaned, and stretched her arms above her head. It seemed she’d overslept, maybe because she’d stayed up so late the night before. She checked her watch. It was almost lunchtime. She hurriedly dressed and went downstairs. On her way, she bumped into the butler, who informed her that Randolph was talking to Basilio in the study.

Connie froze.

Didn’t they have plans that day to walk around sampling all the local delicacies?

Feeling vaguely as if she’d been tricked, she headed for the parlor, where the children were shouting excitedly about something. When they saw her, Lucia ran over, crying, “Miss Connie!” She was holding a large pile of white envelopes in her arms.

“Huh? What are those?” Connie asked.

“They’re all for you!” the girl answered.

“Huhh?”

“It seems the whole island is talking about the trial by combat yesterday! All of these letters are from people who want you to represent them!”

“Huhhh?”

As Connie tilted her head in confusion, Antonio walked over.

“A messenger from the courthouse was just here. A huge number of suits are being filed with the aim of going to trial by combat, and it’s interfering with court business. So this afternoon, they’re planning to open a temporary courtroom to accept cases without the usual procedures. What a move! They’re treating it like some kind of show.”

Scarlett shrugged like she couldn't care less.

"Don't these people have anything better to do with their time?" she scoffed.

Connie couldn't make heads or tails of the conversation.

"Let me know when you're ready to go," said Antonio. "I'll lend you Marco."
Why did he assume she was going to take part?

"Hey, w-wait! Can't I say no...?!"

Antonio looked at her in surprise.

"You don't want to go?"

"Why would I...?"

"I assumed you were the type of rogue who would jump at any chance to raise hell..."

This was a terrible misunderstanding. Connie's cheek twitched.

"Why not accept?" Scarlett prodded.

"Why should I?"

"We won't make any progress sitting around this place. If you go out, you might stumble upon some sort of clue."

She was talking about Cornelia's starry crown, of course. Connie drew her brows together, remembering the conversation with Berta at the shrine.

"You're not scared?" she asked.

Berta had said in no uncertain terms that the crown was a curse. But Scarlett smiled just like she always did.

"Do you think I'd let a silly little curse defeat me?"

Connie stared at her. The other girl had a point. Scarlett herself was probably a much stronger curse than anything related to that shrine. Connie smiled, a little deflated.

"...Fine, I'll go."

"I knew it," Antonio said, backing away from her. *So much for solving the misunderstanding*, she thought with a dry smile. Then Lucia stepped toward her

and tugged at her skirt hem.

“What is it, Lucia?” she asked.

“Aren’t you going to invite Mr. Randolph?”

“Um...”

Connie crossed her arms and looked up at the ceiling. He would probably come if she asked him to, but if he knew she was searching for clues about the starry crown, he might not be very pleased. At first, he acted like he was going to help her, but he seemed to be having second thoughts after their talk with Berta.

Namely, that Aliénore’s surrogate mother might have something up her sleeve.

As they headed back on the vaporette, he had urged her not to do anything without consulting him. Actually, he would probably be opposed to her acting as representative in more trials by combat, too.

“...H-he seems very busy. I don’t think I’ll bother him this time...,” she said, smiling innocently. Lucia squeezed her hand.

“Then would it be all right if I came along? I do so want to see the two of you in action again!”

“Lucia...!”

Half an hour later on the nose, Connie and Lucia arrived at the courthouse. When Connie gave her name to the receptionist inside the building, a staff member showed them to the courtyard. The temporary courtroom was already set up and filled with a lively crowd. There were even stalls selling food and drinks, making it look more like entertainment than a trial.

“Um, so you want me to be the arbitrator?” Connie asked.

“Yes. All these people have named you their representative, so Judge Donatello would rather you simply listen to both sides and arbitrate each case on the spot.”

Connie’s cheek twitched. Wasn’t that the judge’s job?

“I’m not sure I can do it...”

“These aren’t real lawsuits,” the staff member explained. “My guess is they’re less interested in victory than in seeing the representative who out-talked Carlo Vecchio. You needn’t take it too seriously.”

Well, here goes nothing, Connie thought.

“Scarlett, are you ready? You mustn’t take things too far, understand?”

“I know.”

“I mean it. I really, really mean it.”

“Ease up already. I understand. What you want me to do is knock each person out as quickly as possible, right?”

“Are you sure you understand?!”

People were swarming around both the plaintiff’s and the defendant’s tables, forming two long lines. On a platform in the center of the courtyard, the familiar white-haired judge was looking down at Connie with a profoundly distasteful expression. *Why do you keep causing such a nuisance?* Seemed to be written across his face.

“It’s g-good to see you again...?” Connie said.

The wrinkle between Judge Donatello’s brows deepened, and he banged down his gavel without a word.



The first case she arbitrated was a drunken fight. It had apparently started as an ordinary argument, but when one of the men threatened to get violent, onlookers rushed the pair to court. *What a bother.*

“Are you an idiot? Hitting someone in front of a crowd of spectators is practically asking to be arrested. You are at fault for leaving evidence. Next time, be smarter about your fights.”

Having dismissed the man who almost hit the other, Scarlett, occupying Connie’s body, turned to the man who almost got hit.

“You’re nothing but a third-rate lout for riling this man up to the point that he

wanted to hit you. If you're going on the attack, make sure you knock your opponent down so hard, they don't even want to try fighting back."



A pair of young women in their teens each insisted the other had talked behind her back.

"Backbiting, you say? And who's the monster that told you about it? Give me a name. Yes, right here and now. What? You promised not to tell? Then break your promise, I say. Or do you dare disobey me? Good girls, that's the way. See, now, the same girl told on both of you. You know what that means, don't you? And you say the monster is here right now? I'll leave the rest to the two of you. Make sure to give her hell."



A young girl was being harassed by her neighbor's son. Just this morning, ripped-up weeds were left on her stoop.

"I can understand how you might think that plant was a wilted weed, but actually it's baby's breath. There's a tasteless ribbon tied around it, so he probably meant it as a bouquet. In the language of flowers, baby's breath represents eternal love, which tells me he's not harassing you, he's trying to tell you he likes you. And since he's chosen eternity, he might even be asking for your hand in marriage. Whatever his reason, if I were in your shoes, I'd burn it on the spot. What else can a gutless boy like that expect? —Come now, however disgusted you feel, there's no need to cry... What? You're crying from joy? You've been fighting with him to hide your embarrassment, but in fact, you've always loved him? In that case, I wash my hands of you. Do as you please."



Only the first few cases received any semblance of arbitration. The rest got a mixture of intimidation, incitement, and threats. Occasionally even bystanders were targeted. By the time that final pair became a couple, the sun was long set.

"I knew you could do it!" Lucia exclaimed as Connie hung her head and

covered her face with her hands. She had suspected as much from the outset, but Scarlett was truly beyond control. From start to finish, she had been pure Scarlett Castiel, the notorious villain. The crowd's initial cheers quickly turned to cries of confusion and terror, until by the end, for some reason, they were hollering "demoness" at her. *Honestly, demoness?*

Connie felt utterly hopeless as she imagined the next day's rumors. But Lucia clapped her hands happily.

"You were amazing!"

"Amazingly demonic, I know."

"No, you were like a goddess!"

"Lucia...!"

She was a little angel. When Connie threw her arms around her, the girl blinked, then broke into a smile.

"I feel the same!" She giggled. They joked around for a few minutes, until suddenly Lucia's face went blank.

"Lucia, what's wrong?"

The girl peered around anxiously. Then, all of a sudden, she broke free of Connie's arms and took off running. Connie watched in a daze as she pulled a man from the shade of the courtyard trees.

"I found you!"

The man shouted, "Stop, let me go!" It was none other than Carlo Vecchio.

"You've been following me since yesterday, haven't you?!" cried Lucia. "You seemed to be searching for someone, so I assumed it was Miss Connie. That's why I came with her today. If Mr. Randolph isn't around, then I have to protect her myself!"

Connie felt a pang in her heart at the sight of this little girl puffing out her chest so bravely. She was a little knight in shining armor. Or was she an angel?

But this was Carlo. Recalling how violent he'd been the day before, Connie rushed to Lucia's side. When she got there, however, her mouth fell open.

“Wh-what happened to your face...?!”

A black-and-blue bruise surrounded his right eye, like someone had punched him.

“Ha!” he barked when he saw how upset she was. “What business is it of yours?”

“But...”

What if someone had hit him because of the trial? Wouldn't that make it her fault? He must have read this thought on her face, because he said, a little dejectedly, “I got in an accident.”

Could that really be the truth? As Connie wondered what to do, Lucia stepped protectively in front of her.

“Now tell us why you've been following me!”

“I'm not following you. You seem to have the wrong impression. I don't intend to hurt you. I came here today to give you some advice.”

“Advice?”

“That's right.”

He nodded like the whole thing was a bother, then said in an even voice, “My father is angry.”

“Your father...?”

“Yes. He feels you have sullied the honor of the House of Vecchio.”

He was talking about the notorious Gregorio Vecchio.

“If you come to our house right away with the gondola and a box of candy to apologize, I'll act as mediator. That's what I came to tell you.”

“Right now? But I can't make that decision on my own.”

It was all too rushed. This wasn't Connie's problem alone. As she shook her head, Carlo clicked his tongue.

“Listen, little girl. All I meant was to give that detestable Basilio Fargo a little poke in the eye. I didn't intend things to get blown out of proportion. That man

is revolting, but if I go too far, it makes Daniella sad. This is all your fault.”

“Um...”

She tried to understand his argument, but decided it was absurd.

When Carlo realized she wasn’t going along with his plan, he frowned. Then a slightly worried look crossed his face.

“...Just be careful, all right?” he said.

When Connie got back to the Fargo residence, a letter was waiting for her.

“For me?” she asked, glancing at the wax seal imprinted with the Vecchio insignia. It was from Gregorio Vecchio. She had a bad feeling about this.

She broke the seal and opened the neatly folded letter. Then, a second later, she groaned.

It was a legal complaint.

In other words...

...Gregorio Vecchio was suing Constance Grail.



**Constance
Grail**

Seventeen-year-old who went overseas and got called a demoness. Starting to realize this isn't quite the vacation she envisioned. Was warned by Carlo to watch out for Gregorio, but honestly didn't expect him to sue her. ←new!



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Going to burn Gregorio.



**Randolph
Ulster**

Started the chapter alongside the odd couple, but had so little presence, it was sometimes hard to tell where he was. By the second half, he was basically just looking for the missing freight.

Basilio Fargo

Antonio's pointlessly glowing father. Definitely the source of his son's complex.

Gregorio Vecchio

Carlo's father, pointlessly radiating the aura of an evil mastermind. His son had the aura of a small-time crook, so it's probably genetic.



Berta Neuen

Beautiful witch who pretended to be an old woman. Has a hoarse voice, probably from drinking too much. Her nephew is the sovereign, making her one high-class miser.

Daniella Fargo

Antonio's mother and a woman with slightly stern features. Belongs to Lady's Holiday, an island gossip club. Childhood friend of Carlo and Basilio. Something straight out of a girls' manga probably happened among the three of them.

At the sound of a knock on the door of his royal office, Ernst looked up from the untouched mountain of documents on his desk. Into the room strode his old friend Adolphus, who had recently been busy with other matters.

Adolphus fixed his magenta eyes on the wretched desk, which looked as if a wastepaper basket had been dumped onto it, and he frowned slightly.

“Hoarding work again?”

“...I was just about to start in,” said Ernst.

His childhood friend sighed and quietly reached for the documents. Then, with practiced motions, he efficiently sorted them. He seemed to be arranging them according to urgency.

“By the way, have you gotten the arson outbreak under control?” Ernst asked.

“I’m looking into it.”

Word was the fires were being set by extremist saint worshippers. But if that was true, they would have to weigh the impacts of a public announcement. Ernst frowned.

“I wish Randolph Ulster were here.”

Ernst thought back to the young man who had paid him a visit, along with his fiancée, before the pair departed on their royal mission.

“That reminds me. You gave something to the Grail girl when they visited, didn’t you? What was it?”

He remembered seeing a little glass jar, but he didn’t know what it was for.

“Oh, that? Aliénore’s remains,” Adolphus answered casually.

Ernst groaned. Adolphus might sound nonchalant, but he’d just dropped a bombshell.

“Haven’t you learned your lesson yet...?! If memory serves, we received a

complaint through Soldita's sovereign a few years back...!"

The House of Neuen was among the oldest high-ranking noble families in Soldita. The current sovereign was Berta's nephew, and he had written personally to say his aunt was at her wit's end.

"That complaint was addressed to me, not to Constance Grail," Adolphus countered.

"You're a smart man, but you can be so idiotic at times..."

Feeling suddenly exhausted, Ernst buried his face in the documents.

"...Why don't you give up already? I've heard Berta Neuen is a confirmed misanthrope eccentric."

He didn't know what her reasons were, but there must have been something behind her stubborn refusal to accept the remains. Wouldn't it be best to let the matter rest? He glanced at Adolphus, who was looking down sadly.

"It was Aliénore's earnest wish," he murmured. "She asked that if she died, I divide her remains and send a portion to the shrine."

Ernst's heart ached at the sorrow in his friend's voice.

"...Ah, did she?"

He felt sorry for speaking harshly to Adolphus without knowing what drove him, but he couldn't help adding another word or two.

"Still, don't you think you're being a bit obstinate...?"

"Aliénore told me that if Berta Neuen refused to accept the remains, I was to obstinately persist until she grew angry."

"I don't follow."

"She said that once Berta gets mad, you're almost there. So don't you think she must be on the verge of accepting the remains?"

"...Your wife had quite the personality."

Adolphus grinned.

"The truth is, I'd almost given up. But I thought perhaps the Grail girl would

manage something. That's why I entrusted the remains to her."

Ernst thought of the young woman with the pale green eyes. When he first met her, he thought she seemed ordinary and timid, and he'd assumed she would either be dragged into the mud by the malicious people around her or crushed. But in fact, neither happened. She had the impudence of meadow grass that sprang back up, unfazed, no matter how much someone trod on it.

"I hope she isn't pulled into a difficult situation again," Ernst said without thinking. Adolphus burst out laughing.

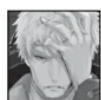
"What?"

"Nothing," Adolphus answered, looking amused. "It's just, I suspect she's something of a magnet for difficult situations. Maybe she's the one pulling *them* in."



Adolphus Castiel

Although it's easy to be fooled by his blasé attitude, His Excellency the Duke is far from upstanding. Much like his daughter, he has an iron will and doesn't much care if problems arise. If they do, he figures he can crush them along with whoever's at fault. Incidentally, he was staring at the lemons on his desk throughout the conversation with his childhood friend.



Ernst Adelbide

King whose stomach has been hurting a lot lately. Really wanted to talk more about the extremists, but given that his friend's behavior is one step away from causing an international crisis, he had to set that aside for the time being. Honestly couldn't care less about the lemons.

The long list of grievances in the legal complaint boiled down to something quite simple.

“Return the gondola you unjustly stole.” That was pretty much it.

Of course, the complaint also mentioned the emotional abuse Carlo had suffered, the defamation of the Vecchio name, and other crimes Connie had no recollection of committing. But since Gregorio wasn’t requesting an apology, she felt she could ignore those.

“The man’s got some nerve!” Scarlett growled. Electricity was crackling from her fingertips.

“Scarlett, please calm down,” Connie pleaded.

“I am always calm. Constance, find me some kerosene and matches immediately. Something that burns well.”

“I mean it, calm down!”

It seemed Scarlett genuinely intended to burn the gondola.

“Restraint is hardly called for in a situation like this! Cinders is all they deserve!”

She turned toward the hall, where the gondola was hanging. But just as Connie was desperately trying to pacify her, there came a knock at the door, and Randolph and Basilio walked into the drawing room.

“Constance, may I have a word?”

Scarlett, who was already in a foul mood, snorted in disgust at the sight of her natural enemy.

“Here comes Mr. Useless.”

“Oh, don’t take it out on him,” Connie chided.

Randolph glanced at the envelope by her side and frowned.

“I heard that Gregorio Vecchio is suing you.”

“So it seems...,” replied Connie.

“May I read the letter?” Basilio asked, looking troubled. She handed it to him.

After scanning it, he said in surprise, “...It’s a legal complaint.”

“That’s what we’ve been telling you...!” Scarlett howled.

Ignoring Connie’s soothing noises, Randolph asked Basilio, “Does anything in particular worry you?”

“...No, I just find this hard to believe.”

“Why?”

“Well...Lady Vecchio was always a rather uninhibited woman, and she did not reform her habits after marrying. Between us, they say it’s impossible to know who Carlo’s father is because there are so many candidates. Perhaps for that reason, Gregorio is entirely uninterested in his son. Carlo’s behavior is so bad, there are rumors he’ll be disinherited and Gregorio will choose a new heir from among the subsidiary families. It stretches credulity to think he’s suing for the sake of his son.”

“You think he’s after something else?”

“...Gregorio made the arrangements for the merchant ship carrying the freight we’ve been searching for. I wouldn’t be surprised if he was asked for compensation before long. Perhaps he’s trying to dodge that affair by filing this other suit.”

In other words, he might have intended this as a distraction.

“That reminds me,” Connie said. “Carlo warned me to watch out for Gregorio.”

“He did?” asked Basilio. “I wonder why.”

“Who knows... But I heard from Lady Daniella that the three of you used to be friends. Do you think maybe he was worried for the two of you?”

“Friends...,” Basilio echoed flatly, as if the word were incomprehensible to him. “Daniella said that?”

“Yes.” Connie nodded. His eyes darted around awkwardly.

“...No, we weren’t friends. We were simply competing for Daniella and trying to hold each other back in the pursuit.”

“...Excuse me?”

“Ah, well, there were many twists and turns in the story, but ultimately it was I who won her affection... Come to think of it, that was when he began his childish harassment... I suppose he’s just jealous...”

“You mean it was a love triangle?”

Connie had assumed there must be a reason Carlo treated the House of Fargo as his enemies, but she hadn’t expected it to be a love affair. As Connie absorbed this news, Scarlett declared solemnly, “It’s the woman’s fault.” That wasn’t true, of course.

“Rest assured we will send a representative in your place. Judging by this letter, the case shouldn’t be too serious.”

Connie wanted very much to accept his offer, but she knew it was partly her fault that things had grown so complicated. And besides—

“A representative, he says? What a joke! I will make the man grovel at my feet...!”

The queen was in a mood. Connie was afraid of what might happen later if she offended the other girl now, so she politely refused Basilio’s offer.

“Ah, I see,” he answered. “That’s a pity. I’d hoped you would be able to attend Carnival.”

“What do you mean?”

As she stared at him, confused, Randolph looked up from the letter and said, “That’s true. The trial is scheduled for the day of Carnival. But it’s in the evening, so you’ll be able to go to the festival in the afternoon.”

Connie was about to withdraw her request to represent herself when Scarlett gave her a pointed look and she swallowed her words.

“By the way, Constance,” Randolph said.

“...What?” she answered, her shoulders slumped.

“Do you plan to continue your quarrels tomorrow?”

Quarrels? He must mean the trials by combat.

“No. If I keep it up, they might promote me to Queen Demoness.”

“Queen what?” he asked suspiciously, but she didn’t have the energy to explain. It was so unfair that she had to spend the day of the festival arguing with a man she didn’t even know.

Randolph must have misinterpreted her mood, because he said in a slight panic, “I’m so sorry about today. We were supposed to go try all the local specialties, weren’t we? I didn’t forget, but you were sleeping so peacefully, and as soon as you woke up, you went off to the courthouse. If you’re free, shall we go tomorrow?”

“...Don’t you prefer searching for freight with Lord Basilio to walking around with me?”

She didn’t intend it, but the words came out spiteful. And it was too late to act nice, so she pretended to glare at the carpet.

“Skewered giant clams.”

Her shoulder twitched.

“Fried whitefish. Bread with fruit and cream.”

She knew looking up was as good as admitting defeat, but her will to resist faded in the face of those appealing words.

“You wanted to try the gelato at the White Rose, didn’t you? The weather’s supposed to be good again tomorrow. Just right for gelato.”

At last, she looked up sulkily at Randolph.

“...Would you mind if I had a double scoop?”

Randolph blinked, and the corners of his lips curled up a little in a rare smile.

“Have a triple if you’d like.”

Connie held back the urge to smile back at him, and she forced her brows into

a frown. She couldn't let him think she was so easily moved. But—

“Wipe that stupid look off your face!” Scarlett scolded her.

It seemed her efforts were in vain.



After her bath, as Connie was struggling in her room with something called rose oil, which had been left out for her, there was a knock on the door. She braced herself, wondering who it could be at this hour, when a sweet voice called her name.

“...Miss Connie, are you still awake?”

Connie tossed aside the jar of rose oil and opened the door.

“Lucia, what's the matter? Can't you sleep?”

The girl's clear, lake-blue eyes peered up at Connie. Her hair was still a little wet from her bath, and her cheeks were flushed. Her soft pink nightgown looked pretty against her snow-white skin.

Lucia was a precocious child who usually liked to talk, but tonight she looked troubled, like she wanted to say something but couldn't bring herself to speak.

Connie wondered if she was homesick. Though she was mature for her age, she was still a child, after all.

“Shall we have a talk?” she asked, taking Lucia's hand. The girl breathed a sigh of relief. Connie sat her down on the sofa, rang the bell for a maid, and asked for two hot milks. Presently the maid wheeled up a trolley, to which she had thoughtfully added a jar of honey. Connie drizzled a generous spoonful of the golden honey into their steaming cups, then held one out to Lucia.

“Here you go. Don't burn your tongue.”

Lucia reached timidly for the cup. It was slightly large for her little hands. She wrapped them both around it and blew on the hot milk.

“...It's so delicious!”

“I heard the honey is from lavender flowers,” said Connie. “I think I can smell a little of their fragrance.”

A whiff of the unusual scent reached Connie's nose. Wanting more, she lifted the cup but was a bit too enthusiastic and accidentally splashed the milk on her nose.

"Ow, hot...!"

"Stop playing around," Scarlett scolded her, exasperated as usual.

Lucia opened her mouth, then closed it again, before covering up a giggle with both hands.

"You're like the spring sun, Miss Connie."

"I am?"

As she wiped her nose with a handkerchief, Connie wondered if she should take that as a compliment. Lucia set her cup on the table and hugged the older girl tight.

"Lucia?"

She had her arms around Connie's waist and her face buried in her stomach. All Connie could see was the adorable whorl of hair on the top of her head. She couldn't even tell if she was happy or sad.

"...That man Carlo had a wound on his arm, too," Lucia whispered.

She seemed to be worried about their run-in at the courthouse. Carlo had said he fell, but what if his father had attacked him? Basilio had said the Vecchios' father-son relationship was chilly. Maybe it was much worse than chilly.

"I think he might have more. I'm sure Carlo's father is the sort of person to do such things without a second thought. When I think about that, it makes me worried for you, Miss Connie."

She said she couldn't bear to stay in her room any longer and had come running here. Abigail had previously told Connie about Lucia's background. The girl had been subject to senseless violence ever since she could remember. Connie sighed softly and stroked Lucia's head.

"Everything will be fine, Lucia."

Lucia flinched, then looked slowly up at her.

“We won’t let anyone beat us,” Connie said, grinning. Lucia’s moist eyes met hers. “Right, Scarlett?”

She glanced at her partner in crime. “Obviously not,” the other girl answered.

“Then shall we get to sleep?” Connie asked, taking Lucia’s hand and leading her to the bed. Lucia looked up at her, confused.

“...May I stay here with you?” she asked.

“Of course!”

Connie lay down on the smooth sheets and patted the pillow. Lucia climbed up timidly. When they had turned to face each other, Lucia let out a cry.

“Oh, Miss Scarlett!”

“What?” Scarlett answered.

“Aren’t you going to sleep with us, Miss Scarlett...?”

“Why would I—” she began, but seeing Lucia’s innocent, expectant gaze, she softly clicked her tongue. “Fine, but just for tonight,” she said grumpily, before reclining on the edge of the bed. Still looking sullen, she propped her elbow on a pillow and wearily rested her chin in her hand.

Sandwiched between Connie and Scarlett, Lucia giggled happily.

“I feel perfectly at home here with the both of you! Abby and Rudy sleep with me like this a lot.”

“They do...?”

Connie glanced around awkwardly. She got the feeling Lucia’s casual statement was actually quite explosive.

“B-by the way, didn’t you go sightseeing with Uly and Antonio yesterday? Was it fun?”

“Very! I ate gelato for the first time! It was sweet and tart and cold, and it melted in my mouth! Uly wanted to try the candy and fried bread from the stalls, but the bodyguard wouldn’t let him. Antonio said he would ask his father so next time Uly could try it...”

Her excited words gradually slowed, and Connie, gazing at Lucia's face, placed a hand softly on her back.

"And then we all got on a big boat...and the water was sparkling, and..."

As Connie patted her back gently, Lucia's eyelids slowly closed.

"...Oh, that reminds me...when I was in town...I found the starry crown..."

"What?!"

Connie's eyes popped open, and she sat up in bed.

"Wh-where?!"

"Near...the rose..."

With that, Lucia's eyes fell shut, and she began to snore softly.

"...She fell asleep." Connie sighed.

"She must have been tired. She's still a little girl, you know," Scarlett said, floating up from the bed as if her work here was done.

"...Scarlett? Lucia just mentioned the starry crown..."

"I heard her. She said it was near the rose. Do you think she means the White Rose?"

"But where is that—Oh, the map!"

Connie leapt from the bed. "Be quiet!" Scarlett scolded. "You'll wake Lucia!" Connie froze, then very gently pulled the travelogue from her bag and eagerly opened it to the two-page map.

"I've been meaning to ask you this," Scarlett said, her eyes narrowed. "But have you noticed that map is several hundred years old and covered in mold? It's not exactly an ideal guidebook... Oh! But I see the fountain plaza was already there. The White Rose is nearby."

"It is?"

"Yes. Yesterday I saw a tourist map near the wharf. I'm fairly sure the shop was inside an arcade in the plaza... Oh, so this area used to be a warehouse district. And how unusual, there was even a coffeehouse."

The drink that people called “coffee,” made by filtering boiling water through roasted beans, was not yet well known in Adelbide. But that didn’t seem to be the case in Soldita. Connie remembered Daniella saying she and her friends often liked to gossip over coffee. In Adelbide, only a few shops on Anastasia Street specialized in it. Connie had tried it a few times but found it too bitter to drink plain.

The map even included the name of the old coffee shop.

“...A Midnight Lantern?”

“Wait a second. I recognize that name.”

Scarlett rested her finger on her lips pensively. Then, seeming to remember, she turned to Connie.

“Constance, show me the table of contents.”

“Okay...”

Connie flipped back to the front. The book was a record of seven days that Sena Rilifarco spent in the Republic of Soldita—the equivalent of today’s El Sol. Aside from the introduction and conclusion, each chapter was named by combining a place he visited and the day he went there. For example, the first chapter was called “First Day: Agrit Hill.”

“I knew it! The name of this café is in the title of the chapter for day two.”

Connie looked down at the table of contents. The line in question read, “Second Day: A Midnight Lantern.” She had a faint memory of reading about it. If she was correct, the shop wasn’t a tourist attraction. Instead, the author had stopped in by chance and chatted with the locals.

“So it was a coffeehouse!” she said. “I assumed it was a restaurant.”

“...Didn’t you say this was one of your favorite books?”

“Only when I was little...”

Connie glanced away from Scarlett’s pointed stare. She remembered her tutor telling her funny stories from the book, but now that she thought about it, she got the feeling she’d never actually read the whole thing.

The pages of the book started to flip on their own, like the wind was blowing them. Probably Scarlett.

“Interesting. It sounds like coffeehouses were places where commoners gathered to talk. Given how many pages Rilifarco devoted to it, he must have been crazy about the place.”

“Um, did you really read it that fast?!”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes sullenly.

“Just who in the world do you think I am? Shall I recite the table of contents from memory?”

“Uh...”

“The first day was Agrit Hill, the second day A Midnight Lantern, the third day —”

“Okay, okay, I get it!”

“I’ve memorized every word of text, too. The first day begins with—”

Suddenly, she stopped speaking.

“Scarlett?”

“...I just noticed something strange.”

She stared at the book, but it seemed no answer came to her. “I must’ve imagined it,” she muttered.

She then collected herself and snorted.

“Anyhow, please don’t speak of my mental prowess and your own shabby excuse for a brain in the same sentence.”

“Oh, I would never,” Connie said, nodding solemnly. She didn’t dare provoke Scarlett any further. “But the people of Soldita really seem to love coffee, don’t they? Daniella drinks it all the time, and it’s been around for so many years.”

“Among the commoners, I understand it’s even more popular than tea.”

“Oh, wow...,” said Connie, skeptical that anyone could like something so bitter. Scarlett lowered her voice.

“Although my mother didn’t seem to like it.”

Connie looked at her in surprise. Then, after a moment of hesitation, she decided to speak.

“Scarlett, I wanted to ask you about Lady Berta...”

“I don’t want to talk about that.”

“...Scarlett.”

“Don’t get me wrong. I couldn’t care less about what that old woman thinks of my mother. I always assumed they were close, so I was a bit surprised. But only a bit...”

Connie blinked.

“You *do* care?!”

“I just told you I didn’t! Are those ears of yours mere accessories?!”

Connie heard the crack of a queen-size lightning bolt. Lucia moaned in her sleep, and Connie frantically shushed Scarlett. Fortunately, the little girl only rolled over without waking up. Scarlett scowled.

“I think maybe we should speak with Lady Berta again,” Connie said. She’d been thinking that since they left the shrine. “After all, judging from the way she was talking, I think she knows what Cornelia Faris’s starry crown is. Although I’m a little worried about the curse...”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes crossly.

“Listen here, Connie. I’d never lose to the likes of Cornelia.”

She planted one hand on her hip and towered forbiddingly over Connie.

“That woman always bragged that if anyone had a complaint, they should tell it to her. But she spent her life hiding out in a safe haven. A person like that, curse me? That’ll be the day!”

She jerked her chin away disdainfully before continuing almost in a whisper.

“...But, Connie, didn’t you think that shrine was like a prison?”

Monte was isolated from the main island of El Sol, with harsh winds

constantly blowing down its sheer cliffs. The rock faces were roughly eroded, and the sole entrance was monitored by guards. Anyone living there would be unable to come and go freely, making it indeed somewhat like a prison.

“Maybe my mother wanted to escape that cage,” Scarlett said, a distant look in her eyes.



“The starry crown?”

It was the next morning, and Lucia was sitting with her legs politely tucked beneath her on the bed, looking quizzically at Connie.

“Now that you mention it, I do feel like I saw something like that somewhere...”

She seemed to have been talking in her sleep the night before. But seeing Connie’s disappointed expression, she quickly added, “I’ll try as hard as I can to remember!” Connie didn’t think she should get her hopes up.

“I think we’ll have to pay another visit to the shrine...,” she said.

But it would take days to apply and be approved again. They might not even be on the island anymore by the time they heard back. “I wonder what I should do,” Connie muttered as she walked down the empty hallway.

“What?” said a voice. “You want to go to the shrine again? You’ve had enough of tourism?” She turned around to find Randolph standing behind her. He was wearing a white shirt and black trousers, with black suspenders over his shoulders. He looked as fresh as a young man just out of his teens.

“I was looking forward to our outing today, but if you’ve got other plans, I suppose there’s nothing I can do.”

“Uh...”

The two things had nothing to do with one another. Connie’s bewildered expression must have been amusing, because Randolph clapped his hand over his mouth and turned away. His shoulders were shaking with suppressed laughter.

“Sorry, just joking. I thought you’d want to go back to the shrine, so I asked

Lord Basilio to help.”

“...You did?”

“With the permission. Normally it takes weeks to get approval, right? I convinced him to expedite our case. Of course, I had to promise I’d help search for the missing freight in exchange, but you should be able to visit Fanoom Shrine again before we leave El Sol.”

“Oh, Randolph...!” she said, breaking into a smile. Randolph nodded with his usual blank expression.

“Shall we go?” he asked.

“Yes, please! I’ll go get my bag!” she answered, running back to her room.

With Carnival coming up the very next day, the town was bustling with activity. Connie smacked her lips over the grilled clams and fried whitefish and was ready to top it off with a piece of fried bread sprinkled with powdered sugar when Scarlett restrained her. “Little piggy!” she said, sounding exasperated. When Connie nevertheless stared longingly at the stalls, Randolph reminded her, “You won’t have room for gelato.”

As they walked down Mille Street on their way to the fountain plaza, she noticed a cluster of children by the side of the road. They were watching a puppet show. Inside the boxlike stage, a young man puppet in a red cape was having a showdown with a group of bandit puppets. Apparently, it was a story about Il Rosso. The caped puppet was just closing in on the villains as the two of them walked by.

The puppeteer skillfully manipulated the puppet, shouting, “I know what you’ve done!” It must have been a standard line because the children cheered gleefully. Thanks to Il Rosso, the villains were arrested. As Connie watched the heartwarming scene, she heard someone calling to them from the pier.

“Pedal boats for hire! Take a ride with your sweetheart! Three coppers for half an hour.”

The man addressing them was stout and seemed good-natured.

“Pedal boats?” repeated Connie.

The boat tied to the mooring post was quite a bit smaller than a gondola, but it had a helm in front of the seats, like a ship.

“How about a pleasure ride? It’s built for two, so there’s no boatman. It’s not difficult; all you need do is push the pedals with your feet. They say dates on the canals are all the rage on the mainland. What could be better for a pair of lovebirds?”

A pair of lovebirds?

Connie perked up. *So we do look like lovebirds!* she thought. A smile bloomed on her face. When Randolph asked if she wanted to take a ride, she nodded instantly. How could she not, in her excited state?

“Do you see the area enclosed by yellow floats? Please stay inside it,” the boatman instructed as they handed him the coins. He then showed them how to operate the boat. Connie didn’t catch everything, but Randolph seemed satisfied, and steered like a pro right from the start.

“It goes faster than I thought!” Connie exclaimed.

“So it does.”

The city looked different from the canal. The water sparkled in the sun.

“Would you like to steer?” Randolph asked after a few minutes. She hesitated.

“I know what I’m doing with an oar, but with foot pedals...”

Steering a gondola would probably be hard, but she’d rowed a small boat before, at least.

“You’ve rowed? Where did you do that?” Randolph asked.

“There’s a big lake in the north of the Grail domain.”

It was a beautiful place where migrating swans stopped in winter. At the start of the year, the extended family would gather there and hold races around the lake. Connie was such an accomplished rower, her family had nicknamed her “the swan.”

“Well, you won’t know if you can do it till you try,” Randolph said, handing

over the task.

“Ahh, this is exhausting!” she wailed after a few minutes.

The more she pedaled, the harder it got, until her knees felt about to give out.

“You’re losing your balance when you turn right. Make sure to keep your weight on your pivot foot,” Randolph instructed calmly, not changing his expression.

“Um, Randolph...”

“Strengthening your core might not be a bad idea. Once you have the basic movements down, focus on speed. You’ll be fine. You’re a natural.”

“Um, I was wondering if we can trade again soon...?”

At this rate, instead of a pair of lovebirds, she felt like a new recruit training under the coach from hell.

“But you’ve just started. What if an enemy started chasing you right now?”

“An enemy...,” she mumbled, peering slowly around. Gondolas glided elegantly through the water, and a group of tourists passed by on a vaporette. Couples teased each other happily in pedal boats. She didn’t see any enemies.

“What is it?” Randolph asked.

“I just wanted to enjoy the scenery for a while...”

“Constance.”

Sadly, his expression was serious.

“Looking at scenery while driving causes accidents.”

She spent the rest of the half hour undergoing relentless training, and by the time she got back to the landing, she could hardly catch her breath. The boatman gave her a puzzled look.

“Are you aiming to become a professional boat racer, young lady?” he asked.

“Certainly not!”

The glazed look in her eyes must have surprised him. He recoiled slightly and said, “No, of course not. We’re open again tomorrow, so I hope you’ll come for

another ride.”

“That last turn was amazing!” Randolph exclaimed, evidently intending this as a compliment.

Seeing the satisfied look on his face, she vowed never to go for a boat ride with her fiancé again.

As they approached the fountain plaza, they turned onto a broad, paved road lined at even intervals with shops under red awnings. Maybe because it was a popular tourist area, there were lots of restaurants and souvenir shops. The storefront near the plaza with the unusually long line must have been the White Rose.

As Connie eyed the line with trepidation, she heard a jingle. Two women were leaving a shop nearby. A roasty aroma tickled her nose, so she stopped and looked around. She spotted a wooden door with divided windowpanes set in an old brick wall. Next to it hung a lantern. Judging from the menu on the cork signboard outside the shop, it was a coffeehouse.

It seemed Scarlett had been right the night before when she said the locals preferred coffee over tea.

“This shop has the same name as the one we saw on the old map,” Scarlett said. “So it’s still in business.”

“What is it called?”

Connie looked up at the red awning. “A Midnight Lantern” was written in old-fashioned lettering.

“...That sounds extremely familiar.”

“Are you telling me you forgot overnight? Frankly, that’s a little frightening,” Scarlett said coldly. Connie looked away. “But what do you think that picture is?”

“Picture?” Connie echoed, following the other girl’s gaze to a faded poster in the trapezoid-shaped bay window. It had no words, only some yellow spots on a dark blue background. It was very avant-garde.

“It’s kind of creepy,” she said, spooked by how little sense it made to her.

As she stared at it, she heard someone yell, “The trial troll!”

“Trial...troll...?”

Was he talking about Connie? Suppressing panic, she turned slowly around. A group of small children were looking up at her with glittering eyes.

“Ooh, it’s the trial troll in real life!”

“The demoness, the demoness!”

“The demon queen!”

They were shouting excitedly and pointing at her.

“Okay, children. Let’s have a little chat about that,” she said. *First of all, demon queen?* As she smiled menacingly at them, one of the children looked at the coffeehouse and shook his head.

“Oh no, not the hat shop! Mama told me not to go near here,” he said.

“The hat shop?”

Connie looked back at the café.

“The sign says, ‘A Midnight Lantern’...,” she said.

“I know, but that’s hard to say. And it’s a weird name.”

“I agree that it’s weird, but why do you call it the hat shop...?”

She could see why a child might hesitate to go in, but it was a coffee shop, not a hat store. The boy pointed to the sign.

“That constellation is called the king’s hat. That’s why we call it the hat shop. You’re a demon queen, and you don’t know that?”

“So this is a constellation...!”

Apparently, the dark blue was the night sky, and the yellow spots were stars. Come to think of it, it did look kind of like a constellation. As for the demon queen comment, she deliberately ignored it.

Then she realized something.

“Wait, did you say the king’s hat?”

In other words...

"A crown," Scarlett said, staring at the coffeehouse with her arms crossed.

"...Do you think this is what Lucia was talking about?"

"It's possible," Scarlett answered.

The group of children must have grown bored because they had begun to drift away. One waved enthusiastically.

"Good luck at the trial tomorrow, Miss Trial Troll!"

"Hey, wait!" Connie cried, flagging down the child.

"What?"

"Wh-what trial do you mean?"

"You're going to give Gregorio Vecchio a thrashing tomorrow, aren't you?"

"Yes, but how did you know?"

The complaint had only arrived yesterday!

"How? I think everyone on the island knows!"

"Small towns are terrifying," remarked Connie.

Feeling exhausted, she watched the group of kids leave, then looked up at the coffeehouse. Could it be a coincidence that there was a picture of a crown constellation in the window?

"Randolph, would you mind if I stepped into this coffeehouse?"

"But I thought you didn't like coffee..."

"I like it with lots of cream."

On a previous date, he had introduced her to coffee with lots of cream and sugar.

A chime jangled as she pushed open the door. Inside, the dim café was filled with the scent of freshly ground coffee. As she glanced around, Connie caught sight of a familiar face.

"...Lady Daniella?"

The Duchess of Fargo was sitting at a table in the back chatting pleasantly with several people who must have been her friends. When she noticed Connie, her narrow eyes grew round.

“Is that you, Constance? And the Earl of Ulster, too?”

She stood up in surprise and gestured them toward two empty chairs.

“Please, join us! Did you come all the way here to see us?”

“Um...”

“No? Since you were interested in our club, I just assumed that was why you came.”

“...Your club?”

“Yes, the one I told you about yesterday, Lady’s Holiday.”

As Connie racked her brain, Scarlett said, “She means the gossip club.”

“Oh yes!” Connie said, clapping her hands. She was certain Daniella had said they met at the best coffeehouse on the island.

“I’m sorry, but it’s a complete coincidence,” she admitted. Daniella looked disappointed, but she called the waiter and asked for two menus, adding, “Everything here is delicious.”

“Oh, I can’t wait!” Connie said. The café was packed. Surprisingly, the customers seemed to span all walks of life, from men and women dressed like servants to those who were clearly upper-class, like Daniella.

“This is the perfect place for a good chat. No one listens in, so you can complain to your heart’s content about your mother-in-law or your husband.” With a finger to her lips, the older woman added, “Don’t tell Basilio!”

Connie glanced at Randolph. His Excellency the Oblivious seemed not to care, but didn’t his presence violate the high-minded ideals of a ladies’ club?

“I wouldn’t want for us to hold you back...,” said Connie.

“Not at all! Anyway, we’re not here to gossip today. We have other business.”

“Other business?”

“Yes. There’s a tradition of eating meringue cookies the day after the masked ball, and we’re trading recipes... Which reminds me, Natalia, have you been able to find out your grandmother’s secret recipe?”

The woman with chestnut hair called Natalia laughed wryly and shook her head.

“Not yet. As you know, my granny is very tight-lipped. I’m trying to convince her with our best grappa, but it may take a bit longer.”

“Ha-ha, I’ll be waiting eagerly. But do hurry. I’ll need time to get everything ready.”

“I already told you I would. Your gluttonous side is showing, Daniella.”

“I can’t help it—your family makes absolutely divine cookies.”

As they were talking, a waiter came to take their orders. Randolph ordered the day’s coffee without too much thought, but Connie took her time scrutinizing the menu. The notes about countries of origin and roast levels meant nothing to her, but at the very bottom she discovered something interesting.

“...Lemonade?” she mumbled.

Daniella must have heard, because she whispered, “It’s a secret specialty of this café!” Connie decided to order it.

Presently, their drinks arrived. A pale yellow glass was set before her. Inside were thinly sliced lemons, and a cute mint leaf floated on top. She sighed in awe at the authenticity.

“Oh, it looks scrumptious!” said Connie.

“They use a closely guarded recipe from the shrine,” Daniella explained.

“The shrine?”

“That’s right. Lady Berta gave the owner the recipe. Didn’t she, Anette?”

A stout lady at their table looked over at Connie. Her tan skin and utilitarian clothing suggested she was not a noble. She looked to be in her fifties or sixties.

“That’s right,” she answered, nodding. “I believe it was shortly after Lady

Berta became independent from the House of Neuen. That must have been more than thirty years ago. She had just taken in a little orphan girl. Normally the girl would have been placed in an orphanage, but rumor has it there was something worrisome about her bloodline.”

Connie’s heart skipped a beat.

“Are you talking about Lady Aliénore?” she interrupted.

“How did you know that?” Anette asked suspiciously.

“These are our guests from Adelbide,” Daniella explained.

“Oh yes, the girl did marry into a noble family in Adelbide, didn’t she. I mostly remember her as a young child. We called her Alli. As long as she stayed quiet, you’d think she was a well-behaved young lady. But what a tomboy she was! The first time she came here—not long after she was adopted—she snuck a sip of Lady Berta’s coffee and started wailing!”

“Lady Berta takes her coffee black, after all,” remarked Daniella.

Anette burst out laughing.

“It must have been quite bitter. And then there was the stress of living in a new environment. We couldn’t get her to stop crying, and Lady Berta was at her wit’s end. She went into the kitchen and made a cup of lemonade for her, with lots of honey.”

“Acacia honey, I’m certain,” Scarlett whispered.

“Little Alli was so happy, you’d never have known she was crying. After that, every time she came here, she begged for the lemonade, so the owner got the recipe from Berta and put it on the menu. That’s what you ordered. Ah, those were the days!”

After a pause, Connie asked, “What was Lady Aliénore like?”

“Alli? She was very beautiful. Her eyes were like jewels. She was slender but surprisingly strong. She’d made the local brats her followers before I knew it. She was the type to punch first and ask questions later, and she was always arguing with Lady Berta.”

“...They didn’t get along, then?”

“Well, they say fighting can be proof two people are close. But I don’t really know. Lady Berta keeps her feelings to herself. I have no idea what she thought deep down, but I know Alli adored Lady Berta. She was always following her around.”

Scarlett was listening quietly. It must have been rare for her to hear someone else talk about her mother.

Connie picked up the glass, beaded with condensation, and took a sip. First, she tasted the tartness of the lemon, and then a spicy sweetness that filled her nostrils. The fresh mint left a clean, refreshing aftertaste.

“...It’s delicious.”

It wasn’t exactly the flavor Connie was expecting from lemonade, but it was good. She could easily make a habit of this.

“You don’t mind the herbs?” Daniella asked.

“I’m not usually very fond of them, but for some reason this goes down easy.”

“I know exactly what you mean! It is odd, isn’t it?” She smiled. “But Lady Berta doesn’t much care for it.”

“Really?”

That was a surprise, considering she gave the café’s owner the recipe. Anette laughed, evidently remembering something.

“Lady Berta detests sage. If she so much as sees those silver-green leaves by the side of the road, she makes a detour to avoid them.”

Connie took another sip from her glass. The distinct fragrance seemed to come from a mixture of herbs—she couldn’t tell which was sage. But the flavor was mellow, providing just the right accent.

Randolph sipped his coffee, nodding with satisfaction. *This really is a nice place*, Connie thought. Round orange lamps hung from the ceiling, lending the charming café a fairy-tale atmosphere. Even the candlesticks on the tables were elegant. They were brass, with a saucer attached at the bottom and an adorable handle on the side. They weren’t needed now, with sunlight filtering in through the windows, but at night, the waiters must have lit the candles. Matchboxes

were nestled in the saucers. They looked made-to-order, with the shop name and the crown constellation printed on the boxes.

As Connie stared at the candleholders, Daniella asked, “Does something about those interest you?”

“This constellation isn’t connected to the name of the café, is it?”

Daniella glanced down at the box. “Oh, the king’s hat? It’s just a bit of wordplay.”

“What do you mean?”

“That constellation, or rather one of the stars in it, stays in almost the same place throughout the year. In the olden days, people used it to find their way on ocean voyages and the like. The king’s hat is only one of its names—it’s also called the traveler’s signpost and the lost man’s compass. Children around here are taught that if they get lost, they should find that star. The shop was named A Midnight Lantern in the hope that, like a light in the night sky, it might be someone’s salvation.”

Daniella pointed out the window.

“From here, you can see it in the direction of the shrine.”

“—The shrine?”

The pounding of Connie’s heart was unpleasantly loud.

“Connie,” Scarlett said, as if she’d realized something. “What’s the name of that travelogue?”

At first the question caught Connie off guard. But when she remembered the name of the book she’d relied on over and over during their trip, she gasped.

“...A Lost Man’s Compass.”

The king’s hat is only one of its names—it’s also called the traveler’s signpost and the lost man’s compass.

By strange coincidence, the book’s title was the very phrase Daniella had just uttered.

“So you noticed!” Daniella said.

“Noticed what?”

“Wordplay was his hobby.”

“...His?”

“...You didn’t know? The man who founded this coffeehouse, of course.”

How could she know that? As Connie puzzled over this, Scarlett muttered, “Sena Rilifarco.”

“Sena Rilifarco?” Connie said, surprised to hear his name.

“Correct!” Daniella said with a grin. But it was Connie who was surprised.

“This was Sena Rilifarco’s coffeehouse? But wasn’t he a merchant?”

“That was one of his professions, yes. He opened this shop so that gentlemen and ladies alike would have a private place to relax. That was how he lured in the class of people who might become his patrons and increased his clientele. Lady’s Holiday started out as a club to enjoy the coffee here, in fact.”

Sena Rilifarco. Wealthy merchant, Il Rosso member who swore loyalty to the Republic, and coffeehouse owner. Who in the world was this man?

A shiver ran down Connie’s spine. The man had suddenly taken on a mysterious, unknowable quality in her imagination.

The ice in her lemonade was long melted. Randolph must have finished his coffee, because he was now bashfully answering Natalia and the other women’s rapid-fire questions. Connie gulped down the last of her watery lemonade and stood up with a clatter.

“Constance?”

“Oh...!”

She hadn’t even realized she was standing. Randolph’s apprehensive voice brought her back to her senses. As she was about to sit back down, Daniella brought her hands together apologetically.

“I’m afraid we’re butting in on your date. I’m sorry for not thinking of that sooner!”

“Date? Oh, no, not at all,” Connie answered, having missed her opportunity to

sit back down.

“You do tend to lose sight of your surroundings, Daniella,” Anette remarked.

“You’re a fine one to talk,” Daniella answered, and the conversation was off again.

Connie glanced at Randolph. He was looking at her with his head tilted as if to ask, *Shall we go?*

“I suppose we should be going soon...,” she said awkwardly, but Daniella didn’t seem ruffled by their departure and saw them off from the table.

As they were about to leave the café after paying their bill, Daniella called out, “Here, Constance, take this.”

She was holding one of the matchboxes. The crown constellation was printed on the outside.

“If you show it to the waiter when you order, they’ll give you a free refill on your coffee,” she said. Connie reached for it.

“Th-thank you...?” she said, confused. Daniella giggled.

“I hope you’ll come again,” she whispered in Connie’s ear. Connie blinked.

“Have a lovely holiday,” she said, returning to her table.

When Connie and Randolph stepped outside, the previously bright sky was covered with a blanket of gray.

“...It looks like we’re in for a shower,” Randolph muttered. The thick clouds were growing steadily darker, threatening an imminent downpour.

“We forgot our umbrellas, didn’t we?” Connie answered.

“I thought it was going to be sunny.”

They exchanged glances and said in unison, “Shall we head home?”

In the end, they curtailed their plans and headed back to the Fargo residence. On their way, raindrops began to speckle the road, so they ran the final stretch. Back at the mansion, Connie went up to her room to change.

“...That shrine,” she mumbled to herself as she dried her damp hair with a

hand towel. “It seems to somehow be connected to that constellation.”

The king’s hat. The traveler’s signpost. The lost man’s compass. All of them referred to Fanoom Shrine. It would be ridiculous for there *not* to be a connection.

“Who knows?” Scarlett said. “I’m also curious about this Sena Rilifarco character.”

It was true that his name seemed to come up whatever the topic of conversation. Connie sighed and pulled the old book from her bag, thinking she would check the description of the shrine just in case.

“There was definitely something in here about that shrine...”

The table of contents listed the places Rilifarco had been on each of the seven days, but unfortunately the shrine wasn’t among them. However, one nice thing about the book was its simple index. Connie found Fanoom Shrine there and opened to the page listed. It was in the chapter for the seventh day, about the Una Pioggia Ruins.

Skimming the section, she found it was a conversation between Rilifarco and the guide at the ruins. He hadn’t actually visited the shrine, but he’d heard about it from the guide. According to the book, that was the first time Rilifarco learned there was a shrine on an island called Monte.

“...Huh?”

Connie looked up.

“Wasn’t Sena Rilifarco the one who built the shrine?”

Even his grave was there, so that much seemed certain. But the book said he’d only learned of the shrine when the guide at the ruins told him about it. Wasn’t that a contradiction?

Connie looked up questioningly, and Scarlett’s amethyst eyes went wide.

“You’re right... I thought I read the whole book, but I must have overlooked that.”

For once, she bit her lip in chagrin. But at the time, she’d been distracted by Lucia’s mention of the starry crown, and she’d never suspected Sena Rilifarco

and the shrine would be so crucial to the story, so it made sense she hadn't noticed the discrepancy. It was amazing enough that she had memorized the entire book. Connie had read it countless times since she was little, and she still had only a vague grasp of the contents.

Connie looked down, brought her finger to her lip, and muttered, "...I wonder why Sena Rilifarco pretended in this book that he didn't know anything about the shrine. Anyone who did even a little digging would realize it was a lie."

She didn't understand what could have motivated him. Was it just whimsy, or —

Suddenly, Connie remembered something and looked up.

"The other day when you said you noticed something strange—could this have been it?"

The first time Scarlett read the book, something about it had bothered her. Maybe it was this discrepancy.

"...I'm not sure," Scarlett answered hesitantly, drawing her brows together in thought. Connie wondered what she was up to, but eventually turned back to the book and kept reading.

The guide's explanation to Rilifarco went essentially like this: Fanoom Shrine was a center of Soldita's ancient faith, where the native gods who dwelled in each area were worshipped all together. It was a polytheistic faith with a great number of gods. If their territory was invaded, the gods would mercilessly punish the invader. But otherwise they were generous, flexible deities, and the religion was tolerant toward outside influences. What's more, the shrine had just released a statement about the recent dissolution of the Faris Empire. Namely—

The shrine welcomed all pilgrims, no matter their circumstances.

Connie blinked at the appearance of this unfamiliar term.

"...Pilgrims?"

"Oh, that means people who visit holy sites. You're right that it's not much used in Adelbide."

“You mean like going to a church to pray?”

“I don’t think you’d call a person going to their local church a pilgrim. It refers to people who have traveled a long way to visit special places with a high religious value, like, say, the forest where myth dictates the Moirai’s spring was located, or a church where a saint is supposed to have worked miracles.”

“Oh, okay.”

“But isn’t this strange? Rilifarco visited the ruins on the seventh day of his trip. I thought he already wrote about the shrine in the chapter about the coffeehouse on the second day.”

“Uh, maybe...?”

Had he? Not to be repetitive, but Connie felt like Scarlett was leaving her in the dust with a book that she’d known for much longer. She felt worse than useless and hung her head morosely.

“Constance?”

“...I feel like my head is going to burst.”

“I see. Then why don’t you go to sleep? The trial is tomorrow, you know.”

Connie looked up at Scarlett, her eyes wide.

“I forgot...!” she cried sorrowfully.

She had completely forgotten that she was being sued by Gregorio Vecchio. The oral arguments were to start tomorrow. She was practically shaking.

“W-what time was the trial again? Do I need to bring anything or do anything to get ready...?!”

She’d done nothing to prepare, obviously. Worse, she didn’t even know what she was supposed to do. She was in a total panic.

“There’s no need to prepare,” Scarlett answered flippantly. “Remember what Basilio Fargo said? The trial tomorrow is just a sham to distract everyone so he can avoid being questioned about the shipwreck.”

“I know, but...!”

Connie seemed about to cry. Scarlett sighed in exasperation.

“It doesn’t start until evening. I think it’s a bit before sundown, so we won’t be able to see the Muro di Luche.”

“Nooooo!”

Connie didn’t want to go to the trial. She really, truly did not want to go.

“If we’re lucky, we might see the flashes of light from the courthouse.”

“I’m never lucky...” Connie sulked. Scarlett laughed.

“Even with me on your side?”

Scarlett’s eyes as she gazed down at Connie were as full of confidence as ever. Those eyes were Connie’s weakness. She frowned.

“Scarlett...”

“Everything will be fine. I’ll beat that third-rate scoundrel so hard, he’ll never be able to set foot on this island again.”

“That’s no comfort,” Connie mumbled despite herself. Scarlett shrugged like she found this amusing.

“Just enjoy the festival tomorrow. Gregorio Vecchio is simply looking for a fight. It will be over before you know it.”

I hope so, Connie thought.

“What should we do about the shrine?” she asked.

“Randolph said he was taking care of the paperwork, didn’t he? Then we just need to find a clue by the time it’s approved.”

Connie turned down her mouth.

“A clue...”

“I think our best lead is that book.”

“I guess. But it’s just an ordinary travelogue.”

It was a little fishy, but the content was a simple description of the author’s experiences. Some exaggerations aside, it was a practical book touching on local customs and history.

“Ordinary, you say?”

“Fine, his itinerary is a little strange.”

Scarlett’s eyes flashed curiously.

“In what way?” she asked.

“Well, to start with, it’s not at all efficient. He keeps crisscrossing the island from one end to the other...”

Connie might not have noticed if she hadn’t visited El Sol herself, but now it struck her as bizarre. First, he went to Agrit Hill on the island’s northern tip, then the very next day he went to the coffeehouse on the high street, and a few days later he was back up north.

“He must have had a lot of time on his hands, or else he was going places at random... What’s wrong, Scarlett?”

She looked shocked, which for her was unusual.

“...I’ve got it,” she declared. Connie stared at her.

“Got what?”

“The days are wrong.”

“The days?”

Scarlett nodded.

“The table of contents isn’t in chronological order.”

“Huh? But it says first day, second day, third day...”

Each chapter had its own day, up to the seventh.

“That’s wrong... No, not wrong, exactly. He did it like that on purpose. Open it to the chapter for the second day.”

Connie opened the book to “Second Day: A Midnight Lantern.”

“Look, right here. It says, ‘As I drank the fragrant coffee, I thought about the shrine and the pilgrims.’ Strange, right? Because he says he learned about the shrine for the first time at the Una Pioggia Ruins. Also, in the chapter about Cyon Port on the fifth day, he writes, ‘Even the laborers who travel abroad for work have come home on boats to be here for Carnival tomorrow.’ But the next

day when he's at Santa Bea Temple, he doesn't mention Carnival at all. The city is the same as always... This is what struck me as strange."

Connie's green eyes popped open.

"Scarlett, you're amazing!"

Scarlett threw her a disdainful glance.

"No, your whole family is just dense. How many generations read this book without noticing? Makes me wonder how your brain is put together."

Connie froze, a smile still pasted to her face. Everyone in the Grail clan was sincere and never questioned anything. It sounded good, but the truth was they were simpletons.

Scarlett snorted and narrowed her eyes.

"He went to the coffeehouse after the ruins, and to Santa Bea Temple way before Cyon Port. If we piece together all the contradictions, we should be able to figure out the real order."

"Um, I guess...?" Connie said, pretending to understand. Instantly, Scarlett issued an order.

"Well, what are you waiting for? Get me a pen and paper!"

"Yes, ma'am!"

There was a pot of ink and a feather pen on the desk in Connie's room. She grabbed the pen in a flurry and took a writing pad from the drawer. After rolling up her sleeves, she copied down the table of contents as written.

First Day: Agrit Hill

Second Day: A Midnight Lantern

Third Day: Il Laza Cathedral

Fourth Day: Tharu Charitable Hospital

Fifth Day: Cyon Port

Sixth Day: Santa Bea Temple

Seventh Day: Una Pioggia Ruins

She was writing in a hurry so there were smears here and there, but she figured it was legible. Following Scarlett's instructions, she cut the list into strips. All the while Scarlett was muttering what sounded like a curse.

"The chapter about Il Laza Cathedral mentioned islanders wearing costumes, so that must have been the day after Cyon Port. He visited the charitable hospital after the Una Pioggia Ruins. It's a little vague, but it sounds like he fell at the ruins and was treated at the hospital. Which means he must have gone to the coffeehouse on the last day—"

Il Laza Cathedral after Cyon Port. Tharu Charitable Hospital after the Una Pioggia Ruins. Connie scrambled to rearrange the strips of paper as quickly as Scarlett spoke.

"I'm done...!" she finally exclaimed.

"This is Sena Rilifarco's real itinerary," Scarlett announced.

Sixth Day: Santa Bea Temple

First Day: Agrit Hill

Fifth Day: Cyon Port

Third Day: Il Laza Cathedral

Seventh Day: Una Pioggia Ruins

Fourth Day: Tharu Charitable Hospital

Second Day: A Midnight Lantern

"...Um, so."

Connie surveyed the strips of paper on the desk and gulped.

"What does it mean?"

She'd rearranged the pieces as Scarlett instructed, but now what? Scarlett paused before turning away sullenly and declaring, "It must mean something."

Even if the order of Rilifarco's visits was shuffled around, the destinations were the same. What was the point of it? As Connie stared at the desk trying to figure this out, she noticed something.

“Huh?” she murmured.

“What?”

“Oh, it’s nothing important.”

Scarlett glared at her. The blood drained from Connie’s face.

“Um, well, I was just wondering why he took two whole days to go to the temple and Agrit Hill. Look here on the map—they’re right next to each other. Also, we went past the temple on the vaporette, and the streets looked like a real tangle. It couldn’t have been easy to walk around. I wonder why he didn’t go to both places in one day. Also...”

“Yes?”

“The places he visited are famous historical buildings today, but back then, wouldn’t they have been ordinary?”

Culturally valuable ruins and scenic hills aside, the temple, shrine, and charitable hospital were all newly built in his day.

“I wonder why he was visiting those places if they weren’t tourist sites.”

Scarlett’s amethyst eyes wavered in quiet surprise.

“There is no meaning,” she finally whispered.

“What?”

“Think about it. Rilifarco is claiming in this book that he knows nothing about Fanoom Shrine. But in truth, he built it himself. It’s ridiculous to claim he doesn’t know about it. In other words, he’s indirectly telling his readers that everything in the book is nonsense. It means nothing. The important thing isn’t the content, it’s the order and the places. He could have written anything so long as he met a certain set of conditions.”

“...Conditions?”

“Sena Rilifarco loved wordplay, right?”

True enough, the name of the coffeehouse and the book were both coded references. But their meaning was trivial, and he’d gone to the trouble of scattering the related clues around the whole island. This suggested that, rather

than hiding some important secret, he was playing a game.

“This is just another example of that man’s blasted wordplay,” Scarlett said, scowling in frustration. “...But something is still missing. The fact that we can’t figure it out means we must be overlooking something.”

“I wonder what...,” Connie mused, but she knew she wouldn’t be able to think of it. Her mind was useless, and her eyes were like holes in her head. All she could do was restate what they knew so far.

“...Um, okay then, I’ll organize our notes. The first day was Agrit Hill, but really that was second—”

“Not second, the second day.”

Scratch that. She couldn’t even restate what they knew.

“Aren’t second and the second day the same thing?”

“I suppose so, but—” Scarlett said, then suddenly froze. “You’re saying ‘second’ and ‘second day’ are the same, huh?”

Scarlett’s flat, cold voice sent a shiver through Connie.

“Oh, no, of course not! They’re completely different...!” she said, bracing herself for an angry roar, but the bolt of lightning she was expecting didn’t come.

“...S-Scarlett?”

When she looked timidly up at her, Connie found Scarlett’s brows furrowed like she was trying to figure something out. Eventually the other girl nodded and looked up, her amethyst eyes taking in Connie’s confused expression.

“I think I figured it out,” she said.

“You did?”

“The words ‘first day’ in the table of contents means we’re supposed to use the first letter of the place he visited.”

Connie blinked. She didn’t understand. The first day was the first letter? Looking down at the strips of paper, she counted on her fingers and finally said, “...Um, so, since Santa Bea Shrine is the sixth day, we take the sixth letter, which

is 'b.'"

"Right."

"...Agrit Hill is the first day, so that's an 'a,' and the fifth day is Cyon Port, a 'p'..."

B, a, p. That didn't seem to spell anything recognizable. Though she was secretly puzzled, Connie kept going.

"Il Laza Cathedral is an 'l,' Una Pioggia Ruins is 'g'..."

The next two chapters were "Fourth Day: Tharu Charitable Hospital" and "Second Day: A Midnight Lantern." Lining them all up made—

"B-a-p-l-g-r-m," she spelled out, still bewildered.

"B A PLGRM. Be a pilgrim," Scarlett said, dropping the words like rain on a still pool.

They both fell silent.

After a few moments, Connie raised her hand and said, "I need a time-out." Then she staggered over to her bed.

"...Like I said, my head's about to burst, so I'm taking a nap."

She buried her face in a pillow. Scarlett sighed in exasperation.

"Tomorrow is that festival you were looking forward to. I hope your head doesn't hurt from thinking too hard."

"Hey, be quiet, you'll curse me...!" Connie whined, sitting up. Scarlett snorted, then vanished.

Rain beat against the windows. Connie closed her eyes, wondering if it would stop by morning.

It rained through the night. She fell asleep to the sound of the howling wind and rain and woke to the distant rumble of a military salute. She stretched, then opened a window. Fresh air flowed in. The sky was clear blue. Pushing the mystery of the travelogue to the back of her mind, she took a deep breath.

This was the day she had been waiting for so eagerly: Carnival.

As she was dressing, someone knocked softly on the door. It was the head maid, an elderly woman who had been with the family since Basilio's father was young. It seemed that Daniella had instructed her to lend Connie a costume for the festival.

"The mistress said you may choose whichever one you fancy," she said, showing Connie to the dressing room at the end of the hallway. Daniella herself had gone out in the morning, it seemed, saying she was finally getting Natalia's prized family recipe.

Costumes and masks were packed into a wardrobe that took up one entire wall of the dressing room. Connie didn't know what to look at first. As she was staring in amazement, Lucia, who had gotten there before her, ran up crying, "Miss Connie! Good morning!"

"Since the two of you won't be in the parade, I recommend light costumes so you can enjoy yourself more freely," the maid advised. "As for the mask, I suggest you avoid the ones that cover your mouth." Connie's gaze darted from one mask to another. After much hesitation, she chose a simple design that covered only the top half of her face.

"Oh, a kitty!" Lucia exclaimed, picking up a white cat mask edged in gold embroidery.

There were as many costumes as masks, from orthodox ballgowns to witch and nun outfits. Lucia chose a dress of thin white lace with frothy frilled sleeves and a wide, knee-length skirt. Large butterfly wings made of the same material were attached to the back. She looked just like an angel who had descended to earth.

Connie, on the other hand, could not make up her mind. Whatever cute little Lucia put on looked like it had been made to order for her, but Connie couldn't get away with that. Eye-catching colors like crimson and purple didn't suit her at all, while anything with a low neckline or a design meant to show off curves nearly brought her to tears. As she stood with arms crossed, surveying her options, her eyes alighted on a bright-red cape. It must have been meant for a man, because it lacked any hint of decoration. As she gazed at the out-of-place garment, the maid walked over to her.

“That’s an Il Rosso costume,” she explained. “When children misbehave, people put on one of these to frighten them. You’ll find them for sale at the night market, but this one was custom-made generations ago for the master of the house. It’s quite fine.”

She added that since there were no records of what real Il Rosso uniforms looked like, the tailor had based the design on a military uniform of the day. Sure enough, the coat’s severe design and stand-up collar would have looked right at home on a soldier.

In the end, Connie chose a dress modeled on the island’s traditional folk costumes, which Lucia had insisted would look “absolutely beautiful” on her. It featured a flowy white gown with a delicate ribbon tied at the neck and a sleeveless lace-up overdress with intricate embroidery.

“Mr. Randolph will be swooning!” Lucia cried.

“Y-you think so...?!”

She knew Lucia was flattering her, but she couldn’t help feeling excited as she finished changing. The maid was waiting to hand her a little glass jar filled with amber-colored liquid.

“It’s for sniffing,” she said. “You may feel faint from the crowds, so please do take it with you.”

Connie opened the lid and brought it to her face. A powerful scent stung her nose, and she scrunched up her features.

“You idiot, Connie, it’s brandy!” Scarlett said, shrugging.

Military salutes rumbled again and again across the blue sky. A large stage had been set up in the park where the opening ceremony was to take place, and the band was playing a lively tune. Unsurprisingly for such a famous festival, the whole town was bustling with crowds. The plaza in particular was so packed, Connie had to be careful not to bump into anyone. But everyone seemed in high spirits.

“The Muro di Luche, canceled...?” Antonio exclaimed in astonishment as they walked through the lively plaza. A white mask with a golden laurel wreath covered half his face. Marco, who was walking next to him in his ordinary

clothes, explained in the same casual tone as always.

“I heard the storm yesterday raised the canal and flooded the warehouses. All the firecrackers they bought were ruined.”

“I can’t believe it...”

Antonio must have been genuinely disappointed, because Connie could see his face fall even through his mask. She glanced at Randolph questioningly.

“Had you heard?”

“Yes. Basilio told me before we left the mansion.”

The decision had been made that morning, he said, and many people were not yet aware, so traffic was still being restricted around Mezzaluna Pier, where the fireworks show had been slated to take place.

“Instead, we’ll be able to dance all night at the fountain plaza,” Marco said.

“But we do that every year...!” cried Antonio.

“Alas, you’ve seen right through me. Well, things like this happen.”

Antonio, obviously disappointed, slumped his shoulders.

“...But I promised I would show His Highness Ulysses and Miss Lucia!”

He sounded a little teary. Even Marco looked surprised.

“Y-young master—”

“Well, now we have something to look forward to next year!” Ulysses broke in with a bright smile. He was wearing a mask with white wings across the eyes.

“N-next year...?” Antonio repeated.

“Yes, next year. We can come again, can’t we?”

He lowered his eyebrows, slightly worried. Antonio nodded, his eyes round.

“There are all sorts of events at the festival, aren’t there? We’ll never be able to see them all today!” Lucia said with a giggle, looking at Antonio before tilting her head sulkily. “Or will you not be our guide again next year?”

Antonio shook his head energetically. “Leave it to me!” he said and thumped his chest. His mood seemed to have abruptly improved.

“I’ll show you two around, too. Follow me,” he said proudly to Connie and Randolph. Lucia tugged his arm.

“But, Mr. Antonio, I wanted it to be just the three of us!”

“You what?”

“The other day we had so much fun together, didn’t we, Uly?”

Ulysses blinked, caught off guard. He looked at Lucia, then Connie, then seemed to understand. “Yes, we did,” he said with a smile.

“B-but if we go off on our own, what about the guards...?”

“It’s fine. Miss Connie has Mr. Randolph to look out for her.”

“I’m not sure I should leave a pair of travelers—”

“Mr. Antonio,” Lucia interrupted, looking up at him with innocent eyes. He staggered at the sight of those two clear pools of blue. “I want to spend the day with my dear friends—you and Uly.”

“Uh...”

His face was growing redder by the second. Ulysses joined in, peering into his eyes.

“Please? I’ve never gotten to play with friends outside before... Can’t we?”

Under assault from the prince’s violet eyes and appealingly tilted head, Antonio seemed to panic. Squirming awkwardly, he whispered, “I suppose.”

“Young master, what a pushover you are!” Marco declared with a breezy smile.

As Connie was thinking about how much fun they seemed to be having, Lucia ran over to her.

“Miss Connie!” she said, lifting her face to Connie’s ear and lowering her voice. “Have fun on your date with Mr. Randolph!”

“Date?”

The girl ran back to Ulysses’s side, and Randolph watched her admiringly.

“Those three certainly seem to have become fast friends,” he said. “I’d heard

Antonio was something of a difficult child, and His Highness can be shy, so I was worried. But leave it to an O'Brian. They know how to win people over."



“You’re right. Her nosiness is just like old frog face. It makes me want to knock her flat,” Scarlett butted in.

“Scarlett...!”

As they strolled through the park after saying good-bye to the children, Connie turned to Randolph and said, “By the way, I noticed you didn’t change.”

There had been men’s clothes and overcoats in the dressing room, but Randolph was wearing the same dour black clothes as always. He wasn’t wearing a mask, either.

“Those clothes seemed hard to move in,” he answered simply. She was a little disappointed. Seeing him dress up would have been fun, considering it was a festival and all. Even a fun costume would have done well enough. Actually, she would have preferred something like that.

“Speaking of costumes, I haven’t seen you in that color before,” he said, gazing down at her. Her gown was white, and the overdress was a reddish amber. In Adelbide, she usually wore grass green or light blue, so he probably wasn’t used to seeing her in something so understated.

“D-does it look strange?” she asked.

“No, I was just thinking that color looks good on you, too.”

She flushed at his unaffected words. As she fanned herself, Scarlett scoffed, “What would a troglodyte like him know about colors?” For some reason, she snorted aggressively.

“Where shall we go?” Randolph asked.

“Um, let’s see...”

What to eat first? Before she could decide, cheers erupted nearby.

“Street performers, eh?” he said.

“That’s what it looks like. I can’t see very well from here...”

Squinting through the crowd, she made out some dancers and a clown. Scarlett floated over their heads.

“Right now, one of them is standing on his hands and throwing knives with his

feet,” she said.

“You can’t be serious!”

Connie looked in the same direction. Of course, she saw nothing.

“If you’re curious, we could go have a look,” Randolph suggested.

“I’m not brave enough to charge through that crowd,” Connie said, shaking her head.

As they continued through the park, they came to an area lined with stalls. Connie trembled in fear at the sight of a strange wooden doll and peered curiously at some tourist masks, then stopped at the fragrance of herbs and sizzling fat. *Skewered lamb!* She was letting her nose guide her forward when she nearly bumped into a tour group before veering out of their way.

“That was close,” Randolph muttered, holding out his big hand. She stared down at it. “...What?” he asked.

“N-nothing.”

Worrying that her own hand was sweaty, she wiped it on the hem of her skirt before slipping it into his. He looked mystified but squeezed back. Her heart was pounding. *This is just like a date*, she thought, then realized, *this is a date*. A man and a woman who cared for each other were out together without anyone else. And hadn’t Lucia called it a date?

Have fun on your date!

Connie felt like she was floating. Without her realizing, a smile spread over her face.

“You probably want to get some food, right? Oh, that reminds me. We never did get that gelato yesterday. How about going to the White Rose?” Randolph suggested.

A minute ago, she’d been solemnly debating what to eat, but now for some reason, she had a lump in her throat. She just wanted to keep walking together like this. But when she shook her head, Randolph tensed.

“...Do you feel sick?” he asked.

“What?”

Her heart was pounding a bit fast, but basically, she felt wonderful.

“Um, no, I’m fine....,” she answered.

“But you never don’t want to eat.”

“Oh, um, I, I just had a little heart palpitation.”

“A heart palpitation?”

The crease between his brows deepened. He gripped her hand tighter and said, “This way.” The spot he led her to was near Mezzaluna Pier. Although the Muro di Luche had been canceled, most of the boats underneath were still there, anchored to save a viewing spot. Maybe because the barricade was so close, there were hardly any other people around. Randolph sat her down in the shade of a tree next to the canal.

“Uh, um...?”

“Are you dizzy? Does anything hurt?” he asked, pressing his hand to her forehead before checking her pulse at her wrist. “...A bit fast,” he muttered. “I’ll take you back to the mansion right away and call a doctor,” he said, looking very concerned.

“B-but I’m absolutely fine...!”

“How do you know? You said you were having heart palpitations,” he said. He sounded offended.

“It was your hand!” she blurted out.

“My hand?” he asked, looking her straight in the eye. She was instantly embarrassed and unable to speak. “What about my hand?”

Of course, he had no intention of letting her comment slide and was interrogating her intently. She gathered her courage and took a deep breath.

“What I mean is, when we held hands, I was so nervous, I thought my heart was going to fly out of my mouth...! We haven’t been on a date in ages!” she shouted desperately, flushing bright red. Randolph blinked in confusion.

“We’re on a date?”

An awkward silence descended. Her fever of a moment earlier cooled instantly, her face went blank, and she asked quietly, “What in the world did you think it was?”

Her voice came out lower than she’d intended. There was another silence. Perhaps having realized his mistake, Randolph froze. It was very unlike him.

“A babysitting assignment?” Scarlett suggested casually.

“A...babysitting assignment...?” Connie echoed furiously. Randolph, returning to his senses, began to spew a vehement flurry of words.

“Oh, no, that’s not what I thought at all. It’s just that we were going to spend the day with Lucia and His Highness, so I just—I just had a bit of a hard time shaking the feeling that I was at work.”

“At work...?”

“I told you so!” Scarlett cackled. “So he was babysitting you after all.”



The street performance was drawing a huge crowd. Standing on tiptoe to peek through a gap in the spectators, Lucia gasped, “Ooh! A man is blowing fire from his mouth!”

“Darn it, I can’t see anything from here!” Antonio groaned, biting his lip in frustration as he glared at the wall of people in front of him. “I’m going to the front!”

“Oh, me too!”

The two of them pushed their way through the crowd. Marco chased after, shouting, “Hey, don’t run off like that!”

Ulysses was left all alone and tried to hurry after them, but he wasn’t strong enough to push through the crowd. Instead, he was carried farther away by the tide of people.

“Ooh, he swallowed a sword!”

“Two swords! No, three...?!”

The crowd was spellbound by a man in an exotic costume swallowing swords

one after the next.

“Uly, did you see that?!” Lucia asked excitedly, glancing over her shoulder. But Ulysses wasn’t there. Her eyes went wide. “...Uly?”



“It’s fine, really. You’ve been working all the time recently and I never get to see you, and even if we have a date on your day off, you always get called in to work anyway. But it’s fine. It’s your job, after all.”

“Constance.”

Connie got the feeling someone was calling her name in distress, but she pretended with all her might that she couldn’t hear it.

“And I know this vacation is work, too. Still, I was happy thinking we could be together. But you thought of it as babysitting. Lucia was sweet enough to give us some time as a couple, and I was excited thinking it was like a date, only to you, it was just babysitting.”

“Constance.”

This time the voice sounded more desperate, but she continued to pretend not to hear it.

“Maybe you ought to quit the military police and become a babysitter full-time,” she muttered angrily before turning away. He placed both hands on her shoulders, looking panicked.

“Listen to me, Constance. It was just a misunderstanding. I was looking forward to it, too.”

“Really, you were?”

She glared at him. He looked solemnly back at her.

“Of course I was.”

“...Really?”

“Really.”

There was honesty in his cerulean eyes. The surprising seriousness of his gaze calmed her. *So he was looking forward to this, too.* Her frayed nerves began to

smooth. Her mouth was still downturned, but she met his eyes to signal reconciliation. He smiled in relief. As she stared at the unusual expression on his face, their gazes entwined affectionately.

“Excuse me, but did you two forget I was here?” Scarlett interrupted.

Without taking his eyes off Connie, Randolph reached out to softly touch her cheek.

“Oh no, I don’t think so. You will not ignore me,” Scarlett continued.

He stroked her cheek with the rough pad of his thumb, then tucked a strand of hazelnut hair behind her ear as carefully as if he were handling a jewel.

“Connie? Are you going deaf?”

His knobby finger sweetly traced her ear before sliding like silk down the nape of her neck.

“Connie?”

The hand embracing her neck pulled her close. A tiny flame of passion glowed in his blue eyes as he gazed down at her.

“I said, Connie!”

His face slowly approached hers, their soft sighs intermingled, and—
“Constance Grail!”

Connie ground her teeth and tilted her head up.

“Scarlett, what in the world are you going on about...?! ”

“Isn’t that Ulysses?”

“...Ulysses?”

Scarlett’s slender finger was pointing toward Mezzaluna Pier. Beyond the yellow ropes, where no one was supposed to go, stood a man in a black cloak and a mask that completely covered his face. The two crescent-shaped holes for his eyes were like eerie smiles that reminded Connie of a storybook phantom.

And in the arms of this phantom was—

“—Uly?! ”

Alerted by her scream to what was happening, Randolph leaped into action. The man in the black cloak seemed to notice them as well. He turned on his heel, still holding Ulysses, and started running.

“Scarlett...!”

“I suppose I must,” she muttered grudgingly before floating upward. Soaring past Randolph, she fixed her gaze on the back of the escaping kidnapper. A second later, a steady stream of small rocks began rising off the ground. Then, all at once, they hurtled toward the back of the man’s head.

A few little rocks obviously weren’t going to stop him, but they were more than enough to shock him. Perhaps thinking that reinforcements had come to Randolph’s aid, the man hesitated for a moment, glanced over his shoulder, and threw Ulysses down.

Wide-eyed, Randolph thrust out his arms to catch the boy. The dull impact momentarily knocked the wind out of him. In that moment, the man in the black cloak vanished into a side street with Scarlett close behind.

When Connie finally caught up to Randolph, she took one look at the limp boy and went white.

“Your Highness...?!”

“He’s just unconscious. My guess is the kidnapper made him inhale a substance that knocked him out.”

Connie kneeled frantically on the ground and removed the laurel wreath mask from Ulysses’s face. He didn’t have any obvious injuries, and his breathing was even. As she sighed in relief, Scarlett returned from her chase.

“He got away. There are too many people dressed just like him.”

She clicked her tongue irritably.

“Also, I ran into Lucia and told her to meet you here.”

A few moments later, Lucia, Antonio, and Marco came running up to them.

“Miss Connie...!” Lucia cried, on the verge of tears as she flew into Connie’s arms. When she saw Ulysses lying next to them with his eyes closed, she gasped.

“Don’t worry, he’s only sleeping,” Connie said. Lucia sighed in relief.

According to the children, they had been watching the street performers in the plaza when, before they knew it, Ulysses had vanished. When Connie told them that he was nearly kidnapped, Lucia gasped, and Marco turned white and apologized profusely. The bodyguards with them did the same.

“I’m just glad Uly is safe...right...?” Connie said, noticing something strange about the mood. Randolph looked even sterner than usual, and Marco and the guards were shaking like newborn fawns who might collapse at any second.

“...What?” she asked.

If Ulysses was safe, why was everyone acting like they’d just been sentenced to death?

“You idiot, Connie, use your brain!”

“...I don’t get it.”

“Listen to me. Someone just tried to kidnap Ulysses Faris.”

“And...?”

“Have you already forgotten that the same thing happened in Adelbide? It almost turned into a war!”

Connie pressed her fingers to her temples and slowly closed her eyes. Finally, it hit her.

Maybe...

...this was what people called “a big problem.”



When Connie and the others got back to the Fargo residence, they gathered in the drawing room. The master of the house, Basilio Fargo, sat in the middle of the room and listened to their news. The more he heard, the tenser his expression became. When he had heard the whole story, he let out an extremely long sigh.

“...Thank goodness His Highness wasn’t seriously injured.”

Then he looked up at the ceiling like he couldn’t fully comprehend the

situation.

“I never imagined someone would plot to kidnap the prince in a backwater like this.”

“We still don’t know what their motive was. Our first order of business is to figure out what the criminal was after,” Randolph answered coolly, evidently used to situations like this.

“Well, assuming it was someone from Soldita, they might have simply been after a ransom.”

“Or they may have been hired by Faris. The new queen hasn’t been in power for long, and I assume she’s facing opposition from loyalists to the old regime. In any case, we’ll question His Highness when he regains consciousness. He may be able to supply a clue.”

Whatever the kidnappers had made him inhale must have been potent, because the prince still wasn’t conscious. A doctor was stationed by his side. Connie was worried about him, but they expected him to wake up soon, and she was waiting it out.

The tension in the room was enough to make even Connie cower. The children were listening silently as the adults talked. Basilio had told them to rest since they must be tired, but both refused to go up to bed.

Just then, Connie noticed that Scarlett was staring at Antonio, a deep crease between her brows. Wondering what was behind her unusually harsh expression, Connie whispered, “What’s wrong?”

“His mask.”

“Huh?”

“He’s got a different mask.”

“He does...?”

He’d taken it off when they came inside, but perhaps because of the rush to tell his father what happened, he was still gripping it in his hands. Connie glanced at it. It was a classic design with white wings across the eyes.

“That’s the mask Ulysses was wearing,” Scarlett said.

“It is?”

“Yes. Antonio’s had a laurel wreath on it.”

To be honest, Connie didn’t remember at all, but if Scarlett said so, it was probably true.

“Antonio?” she said. He was listening to the adults with a slightly nervous look on his face. “Did you trade masks with Uly?”

He looked puzzled for a moment, then registered her meaning and nodded.

“Oh, yes. The one I was wearing was a little small and it made my ears hurt. Uly was kind enough to give me his.”

Randolph looked up in surprise.

“Lord Basilio. The Fargo crest is a lily and a laurel bough, isn’t it? Is Antonio’s mask—”

“Yes. It was custom-made with our crest worked into the design.”

“Would a stranger recognize it if they saw it?”

“Anyone who knows our crest would recognize it, I’d think.”

Hearing this, Scarlett smiled affectionately and said, “Aren’t you glad, Connie?”

“Huh?”

“Didn’t you hear what they said? Those two boys have the same hair and they’re the same height. Through a mask, their eyes look the same, too.”

“...Huhhh?”

“So the kidnappers were after that impudent boy over there, not the prince.”

She pointed at Antonio, who looked anxious.

“Which means that even if he was kidnapped or violated by some pervert, it wouldn’t start a war. Now let’s get back to the festival before we waste any more time.”

“That’s not the issue here...!”

What was this crazy woman saying? But as Connie was shouting at Scarlett,

Randolph reached the same conclusion as the apparition. He narrowed his eyes and groaned, “I think they were after Antonio, not His Highness.”

Which meant it was probably someone with a grudge against the House of Fargo.

“Could it have been Carlo Vecchio again?” he asked quietly.

Scarlett’s eyes flashed.

“You think he’s really a pervert?”

“No, I don’t think so,” Connie retorted without smiling.

Frowning, Basilio shook his head.

“No, Carlo is a coward, as you’ve seen. He’s a good-for-nothing scoundrel, but I don’t think he’d do something like this. If anyone would, it’s Gregorio.”

Carlo had warned them to watch out for his father. If Gregorio really was behind this— Tears formed in Connie’s eyes.

“This might be my fault,” she said.

“No, you were simply pulled into it,” Basilio said, flatly rejecting the notion. She could see the concern for her in his eyes. She was impressed by how calm he was, even though his own son had been the intended target. “There’s only one person at fault here, and that’s the criminal. I won’t stand for it.”

He jumped up from the sofa.

“Where are you going?” Connie asked, startled by the abrupt end to the conversation.

“To the Vecchio residence. There’s someone I need to beat to a bloody pulp.”

“So you weren’t calm after all!”

In fact, he was burning with rage. As Connie took this in, the door opened and someone entered.

“Would you mind waiting a little longer before raiding the Vecchio house?”

It was Ulysses, evidently conscious once again.

“Uly!” Lucia cried, running to his side. He was still white as a sheet. “Don’t you

need to rest?”

“I’m fine,” he said with a smile before turning to Connie and the other adults. “There’s something I want to tell you about the man who tried to abduct me.”

First, though, he apologized for getting lost in the crowd during the street performance.

“I tried to go back the way I’d come, but before I knew it, I was near the pier.”

This was puzzling.

“Isn’t the plaza quite far from the pier?” Connie asked.

“Uly’s sense of direction is a little unreliable,” Lucia whispered.

“A little...?”

Come to think of it, Ulysses’s half sister Alexandra had been lost, too, the first time Connie met her. Maybe it was a trait common in the royal family of Faris.

“As I was looking at the anchored gondolas and wondering what to do, a man in a black cloak attacked me from behind.”

The prince struggled, but the man pressed a handkerchief over his mouth and he quickly lost consciousness.

“But just before my vision went dark, I saw something quite clearly.”

“What was it?”

Ulysses narrowed his violet eyes.

“The man...*had a tattoo of the sun on his wrist.*”

The room fell silent.

“Daeg Gallus,” Randolph whispered in a chillingly low voice. The hair stood up on Connie’s arms.

Daeg Gallus, a criminal organization whose network sprawled across the entire continent. Connie had never wanted to hear that name again.

Why are they on this island?

As the tension rose, someone knocked on the door. Connie flinched in surprise. Into the room walked Daniella, looking apologetic.

“I’m sorry to interrupt. Basilio, may I have a word with you?”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“I’ve just heard something strange from Natalia.”

“Something strange?” he asked, raising his eyebrows.

Daniella nodded. She looked upset.

“Yes. You might recall that Natalia is a member of the women’s division at the island Chamber of Commerce. It seems she overheard some of the officers talking. Those weren’t masks on the boat that sank. They were firecrackers for the Muro di Luche.”

“...Firecrackers?”

“The ship seems to have come by way of Melvina. According to Natalia, that’s probably where they got the fireworks.”

Connie blinked in surprise. Melvina was famous for saltpeter, wasn’t it? But before she could think through the implications, the conversation moved forward.

“So they weren’t damaged by a flood—they were never here to start with.”

Even Connie understood that much. The cargo probably sank to the bottom of the ocean long ago.

“But why lie about it?”

“I heard the account book says they were ordered from the mainland. Lady Berta said before that firecrackers from Melvina are quite a bit cheaper than ones from the mainland. But with all the tariffs, the end cost is almost the same. So if they bought firecrackers somewhere cheap and said they were a mass shipment of masks...”

“...They could pocket the difference.”

“I hate to think this, but some of the officers may be working with Gregorio Vecchio to embezzle funds.”

“...Just how many firecrackers are used in the Muro di Luche?” Randolph asked.

“Probably a few hundred chains of ten,” Daniella answered.

“That’s a lot.” Randolph sighed. “Have the bodies of the crew on board the sunken ship been found?”

When Basilio answered, he sounded slightly confused by the change of subject.

“Not all of them, but I was informed that several bodies washed up onshore. It’s customary on the island to wait until after the festival to hold funerals, so they’re at the morgue.”

“Were autopsies performed?”

“I don’t think so, since it was an accident...”

“Then you should inspect them immediately. That is, if their lungs haven’t been eaten by fish.”

“Their lungs?” Basilio asked. Then, seeming to catch Randolph’s meaning, he announced he was heading to the morgue and rushed out of the room.

“My oh my, this *is* turning into a fuss,” said Scarlett, who had been listening from midair with her chin resting in her palm. She grinned.

“What do you mean?” Connie asked.

“Why, only that he’s gone to see if there’s water in their lungs.”

She twirled around happily in midair like she was dancing. Her crimson dress swirled around her.

“In other words, did they die because their ship sank...”

Her amethyst eyes fixed on Connie, then slowly narrowed.

“...or were they thrown into the water after they were already dead?”



**Constance
Grail**

Seventeen-year-old whose dates for some reason always escalate to the level of international crises. Considering an exorcism when she gets back home.



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old whose skills at deduction would surprise even a certain famous detective trapped in the body of a child. Unfortunately, her near-useless partner is utterly unable to keep up with her mental acrobatics.



**Randolph
Ulster**

Young man whose moment in the limelight is usually stolen by a certain ghost.



Ulysses Faris

Spends most of his time being kidnapped or attacked.

Sena Rilifarco

Mentioned an awful lot.

Basilio Fargo

Antonio's father. Turns out to be an impulsive meathead despite his glowing appearance. So used to being surrounded by beautiful people, he genuinely thinks his son is the cutest boy in the world. Is, therefore, constantly fretting to Marco about what to do if Antonio is kidnapped because he's so cute, only to be roundly ignored.



“Revolting...!”

No sooner had Kyle Hughes brought the glass in his hands to his lips than he jerked it away again.

He was visiting the royal office to report on the extremists when he’d received the drink. He glanced at the duke, the master of this room and the one who had offered Kyle the glass. The king’s right-hand man was, as always, chillingly handsome. Roughly speaking, he was Kyle’s superior’s superior’s superior. Delivering a status update to a man like that hardly seemed like a job for an underling like Kyle. But Duran Belsford, the man whose job this should have been, was honest—simple, even, to put it rudely—which made him a terrible match for a scheming old fox like Adolphus. He usually returned from such visits loaded down with annoying tasks, so he had recently been banned from delivering the reports. Randolph Ulster had been going in his place.

The House of Castiel and the House of Ulster had a relationship going back generations, and Randolph was famous for being a favorite of the foul-tempered Adolphus Castiel. However, the man of last resort was currently on vacation, frolicking with his fiancée under the cover of a diplomatic trip.

This meant that a new sacrificial victim was needed. Kyle had been secretly amusing himself by wondering who the next poor lamb would be, when a senior staff member tapped him on the shoulder and showed him smiling to the door. Or rather, chased him out of it.

In short, Kyle Hughes had drawn the short straw and was now serving as the substitute’s substitute. And it wasn’t long before he received his initiation at the hands of the old fox.

“What is this? It tastes disgusting. Is this how you torture newcomers?”

“It’s just lemonade,” Adolphus said, peering at him curiously.

“Lemon...aid...?”

As he was racking his brain for a poison by that name, it occurred to him that it was the word for a refreshing sweet-tart beverage.

“Aha, so that rotten flavor must be the acidity of the lemons,” he said. He noticed some seeds floating in the liquid. “You really ought to either sue your cook or fire him.”

Perhaps a maid had prepared it rather than a cook. But whoever it was, they’d be better off in some other profession. This one was clearly not working out.

Kyle had completely forgotten his etiquette in the shock of the moment, but Adolphus didn’t seem to care.

“Oh, I made it myself,” he said with a placid smile.

“...You what?”

A terrible silence descended.

“I was attempting to reproduce the lemonade they make in my wife’s hometown, but perhaps it wasn’t to your liking.”

“I’d hardly call it an issue of personal preference.”

Kyle had more to say, but it would have been disrespectful, so he stopped there.

“Anyhow, I hear the saint-worshipping extremists are planning something,” Adolphus said, as if nothing had happened. Did he really not care? Kyle hastily straightened his back. He was here to report on that very subject.

“That’s right. Kate—I mean, Kimberly Smith’s assistant—says she heard it directly from the believers. She’s truly a genius at getting people to let down their guard—sorry, that was a digression. The point is, according to our intelligence, they are planning some sort of action in Saint Mark’s Square in the near future.”

“Another fire?”

Kyle shook his head.

“Actually, a man was arrested several months ago in a different case, and the

fellow seems to have been a truly *passionate* saint worshipper.”

The man had been setting off powerful fireworks along the Senne River outside the city, night after night, seemingly for the fun of it. He told the police his name was John Smith and wouldn't say exactly how he got the fireworks.

“Fact is, they were smuggled in from Melvina,” said Kyle. “The mastermind was a man our perpetrator didn't know, but he infiltrated the group as a believer and approached them with the plan.”

Originally, the whole thing was supposed to unfold much later.

“What plan?” Adolphus asked.

“It seems they intended to gather a large quantity of fireworks to make a bomb.”

But before they could, the man calling himself John Smith had gone and set off all the fireworks himself.

“It could be that the purpose of the recent arsons was to see how long it took the military to respond, and by what routes they arrived.”

“You mean they're still making a bomb?”

“We think they'll probably smuggle it in from somewhere.”

It seemed certain the event in question would take place in Saint Mark's Square.

“According to this John fellow, the man had a strange tattoo on the back of his neck.”

Adolphus's eyebrows shot up. Kyle narrowed his eyes and said seriously, “It appears that Daeg Gallus is behind this.”



Adolphus Castiel

Not gonna lie, was using the new guy as a taster.



Kyle Hughes

Twenty-six-year-old who nearly crossed the River Styx, thanks to a sip of lemonade. Wanted to tell Adolphus more about the extremists, but that cursed yellow liquid made him forget most of what he had to say. Currently searching for a wife to soothe his heart. ←**new!**

Several hours later, Basilio returned from the morgue. He said there had been no water in the lungs of any of the washed-up bodies. Although there were no obvious wounds, the mouths, throats, and gullets of the men showed signs of inflammation, as if they had been burned. Most likely, the murderer had pretended to be a fellow sailor and poisoned them, he said.

"Poisoned..." Connie muttered grimly. The word always brought to mind Daeg Gallus.

"Very likely it's the work of those scoundrels," Randolph said, having evidently reached the same conclusion. Assassination by poison was their specialty.

"But why go after a merchant ship?"

They now knew the cause of the shipwreck, but not the reason, which was even more important. Why would the criminals go to the trouble of killing all those people just to sink a ship?

"Firecrackers, I reckon," Randolph answered.

"Firecrackers?"

"Yes. They can be used for gunpowder. That's probably what they were after."

"Gunpowder..."

That was an unsettling word.

"If they search the sunken cargo, they probably won't find it. I bet it's already been transported off the island."

Basilio knit his brows.

"But I can't see why they sank the ship so close to the island," Randolph continued. "It's awful to say this, but if they'd sunk it in the middle of the ocean, they wouldn't have had to worry about evidence or witnesses."

“No, if a ship scheduled to return to port disappeared without a trace, the Maritime Bureau would investigate,” said Daniella. “And if the case was deemed suspicious, the Security Commission would be notified, and they might look into purchase records in Melvina. On the other hand, a shipwreck is treated like an ordinary accident.”

In other words, the boat had been sunk near the port to suggest an accident rather than a more sinister event. But Basilio still looked unconvinced.

“I understand that they wanted the firecrackers. But why go after Antonio? And it’s strange that these Daeg Gallus people would still be hanging around the island after getting what they wanted.”

“Can you think of anything they might want other than the firecrackers?”

“Honestly, I haven’t the slightest idea... But if they were trying to kidnap Antonio to threaten me, it must have to do with the Maritime Bureau. I don’t work there anymore, but I’ve still got plenty of connections.”

Until the previous year, Basilio had been a maritime commissioner—an important position in the Maritime Bureau.

“I don’t know what they want me to do so badly they’d go that far, but we should probably check the records of boats leaving and entering the port over the past few days.”

“In that case, let’s go to Cyon now,” Randolph said. Then, seeming to remember something, he stopped and turned slowly to Connie. Though his face was as blank as always, she could somehow tell that he was studying her mood.

Now that she knew who the criminals were, even Connie wasn’t so optimistic as to suggest going back to the festival to lift their spirits. She wanted to go with Randolph, but then she remembered the trial that evening. To break the awkward mood, she said instead, “Please take care while you’re out.”

Randolph nodded solemnly. “I’ll come back before the trial starts.”

“There’s no chance he’ll manage that. You hear me, Constance? Not a chance.”

“Scarlett, be quiet.”

Connie flopped sulkily over the coffee table in front of the sofa. She knew it was bad manners, but she was the only one left in the drawing room, so she wasn't too worried. Lucia had left a little earlier, pushing Ulysses out of the room even though he insisted he was fine. Antonio had followed, looking worried.

"I really don't feel like going to that trial right now... Maybe I'll skip it..."

"You'll lose by default."

"I don't care. I agreed on impulse, but I doubt Gregorio really wants to go, either."

"What do you mean?" Scarlett asked, looking caught off guard for once. Connie didn't notice.

"You and Basilio both said Gregorio was suing me only to draw attention from the shipwreck. Given that everyone on the island knows about the trial, don't you think he's already achieved his goal? Why bother going?" she asked.

"His goal...?" Scarlett echoed, resting her finger on her chin pensively. Then, a moment later, she murmured, "Oh, so that's it," and looked down at Connie.

"We don't have time to loaf around, Connie. We've got to get out of here."

"My stomach is starting to hurt. There's no way I can go to the trial," Connie said, rolling over on the sofa. Scarlett snorted.

"You idiot, I couldn't care less about the trial."

"What?" Connie's eyes popped open. "You don't care?"

"No. We're going to get that freight back."

"...Freight?" Connie asked, bewildered.

"Yes, freight."

"You mean the freight that Daeg Gallus stole?"

"Yes, that freight."

Connie was even more confused. Had Scarlett of all people forgotten the conversation that just took place?

“But they said it was already taken off the island.”

Randolph and Basilio had agreed that must be the case. Scarlett narrowed her eyes in amusement.

“No, it’s still here. It’s in the Canal Grande.”

Silence.

After a full thirty or forty seconds, Connie’s eyes went wide and she said, “It is...?!”

“It is.”

Scarlett’s answer came easily; she wasn’t teasing Connie. But if the freight was in the Canal Grande, that meant—

Suddenly, Connie had a flash of inspiration.

“I know,” she declared confidently. “The boat with the freight has been constantly moving around...!”

“You idiot,” Scarlett retorted. “If a little boat like that kept moving for days on end, the boatman would be dead by now. Anyway, didn’t you hear Daniella say that any boat off its established route would immediately be reported?”

“Oh...”

“That aside, there’s a perfect place to store the freight without anyone getting suspicious.”

“That’s impossible. If they left it in one place for days, someone would surely notice.”

“Are you so sure? I’m certain you saw it yourself. Do you remember?”

“I saw it...?”

“Yes.”

Connie thought back on everything she’d done since arriving on El Sol. The courthouse, Fanoom Shrine, the fountain plaza. There was nothing in any of those places resembling freight—or so she thought.

“Remember when you met Gregorio Vecchio?”

Why was Scarlett mentioning him all of a sudden? His image popped into Connie's mind. The ivory hair, like Carlo's. The high-strung expression. She'd only seen him for a moment, but she couldn't forget the chilling look in his eyes.

They'd been at—

"...Mezzaluna Pier."

Scarlett smiled smugly.

Connie had been on the vaporette, on her way to Fanoom Shrine. But what had Gregorio been doing there?

"B-but wait a second..."

Connie was still confused. In the canal under the bridge, lots of gondolas had been anchored to save viewing spots for the Muro di Luche. All of them had enclosed chambers so their noble passengers could travel incognito, and the seats were surrounded by black awnings so no one could see inside. It was true that a large piece of freight stored in such a boat might go unnoticed. But Connie still had questions. Namely, why would the criminals do something like that? Anyone could access the water under the pier. She didn't see why they would risk someone discovering the freight there.

"Why would they do that?" she asked.

"After word got out about the shipwreck, all sorts of people were coming and going at the port. They needed to hide the freight somewhere until things calmed down. Doesn't that seem like an ideal spot for temporary storage?"

"But didn't the investigation end days ago? Wouldn't they have taken the freight off the island already?"

"I don't think so."

"How can you be sure?"

"Because they can't move it."

What did she mean? Connie furrowed her brow.

"Don't you remember, Connie? None of those gondolas had people in them."

"Right."

Connie had asked why they weren't stolen if no one was guarding them, and one of the passengers on the vaporette explained that the forcolas of anchored gondolas were locked to prevent anyone from moving them, requiring a key.

"But how do you think people leave after locking their boat?" Scarlett asked.

"Huh?"

Connie hadn't thought about that. No one was on the gondolas, but she could hardly imagine the gondoliers swimming home in the canals.

"Well, I suppose they must come in two boats," she said. "They leave the one with the awning and use the other to get back."

"That's my guess, too," Scarlett agreed. "Then what do they do when they want to move the anchored boats?"

"Come back with an extra gondola, climb onto the anchored boat, and unlock the forcola."

Scarlett smiled, then whispered in Connie's ear, "The criminal lost the key."

"That's ridiculous!" Connie said, assuming the other girl was joking. But when she looked up, Scarlett's amethyst eyes were staring right at her. *She's serious*, Connie realized, gulping. "Why do you think that...?"

"Because Gregorio Vecchio is suing you."

"What?"

"It wasn't a distraction after all. It's obvious if you think about it. If Gregorio Vecchio was really trying to avoid paying damages for the shipwrecked boat, he could have simply threatened anyone he wanted to shut up instead of doing something as roundabout as suing you. Of course, that would never occur to a good boy like Basilio Fargo."

"Th-then why would he sue me?" Connie managed to ask.

"He has a reason, of course."

"A reason...?"

"Yes. What do you think it is?"

Connie thought back to the complaint he'd sent. It was full of arguments

about why he was a victim, but there was only one thing he clearly asked for.

“...The gondola.”

He wanted the gondola they’d stolen from Carlo Vecchio back. Come to think of it, that’s all he wanted from the start.

“Very good, Connie,” Scarlett said, smiling as if she were praising a slow student. “This is just a guess, but I think the key to unlock the forcola is hidden in that gondola.”

Connie’s mouth dropped open.

“No!”

“Shall we have a look?” Scarlett asked, pointing to the entrance hall.

Connie followed her there, where a staircase spiraled upward in the central atrium. The long wooden boat with its raised ends hung proudly among the white marble statues. It looked completely out of place, of course.

“But wait, if Gregorio had the key, that must mean—”

“He’s probably with Daeg Gallus.”

That meant he had no intention to use the firecrackers in the festival to begin with, but instead planned to illegally channel them to the organization.

The firecrackers had been purchased in Melvina according to plan, and just before the boat arrived at the port in El Sol, Daeg Gallus operatives had attacked it. They obviously anticipated the investigation by the Maritime Bureau and stashed the firecrackers somewhere, after which they only needed to get them off the island. Up to that point, the plan seemed to be going fine, but when Connie and Scarlett stole the Vecchio gondola, everything went haywire. Daeg Gallus must have been in an uproar.

“Coincidentally, Ulysses said he was attacked by the man in the black cloak near the bridge. Perhaps the man was guarding the freight there.”

“Guarding it?”

“Yes. Ulysses was wearing a mask with the Fargo family crest, and the gondola in question is here at the Fargo residence. Maybe they decided to kidnap him

on the spot, thinking the impudent duke's son might have caught on to them."

In other words, the failed kidnapping might have been the unplanned result of mistaken identity and happenstance.

Connie inspected the gondola. One end was fitted snugly with a crimson velvet love seat, with an ottoman made of the same material set nearby. She checked on the built-in display shelf and took the lid off the ottoman to look inside, but she didn't see a key.

"S-Scarlett?"

When she looked up hoping for help, Scarlett snorted.

"They would never hide it somewhere so easy to find."

She crossed her arms and surveyed the boat.

"That seat is suspicious. Connie, take that off."

She was pointing to the cushioned bench of the love seat.

"...Um, Scarlett? Have you heard the term 'property damage'? It's a crime."

"I can do whatever I want with my own possessions, can't I? Hurry up. Or should we let Daeg Gallus do whatever they please?"

"Don't come crying to me if we get in trouble!"

Metal fittings were screwed into the wooden base of the cushioned seat. Connie pulled up hard, and it came off neatly. Underneath was a cavity filled with blankets, tools, the anchor, and rope.

"—Found it."

A brass key was hanging from the claw of the anchor. That had to be it.

"What did I tell you? Now that we have the key, let's hurry over to Mezzaluna Pier."

"But what about the trial?"

It was starting in a few hours. They might not have time to get to the bridge and back. But when Connie mentioned this to Scarlett, the apparition shook her head.

“We don’t need to go. We’re supposed to bring the gondola to the courthouse as evidence, right? That means Gregorio will be there for sure. Now’s our only chance to outmaneuver them.”

“B-but if I’m not there, they might guess that something’s happened, and when they realize they won’t be getting the key back, who knows what they’ll do...”

This wasn’t just a nasty noble they were dealing with. It was a man involved with Daeg Gallus.

“Miss Connie?”

A child’s clear voice cut through the tense atmosphere. Looking around in surprise, Connie found Lucia O’Brian standing behind her.

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t help overhearing.”

She glanced down apologetically, then looked Connie straight in the eye.

“I’ll go to the trial,” she announced.

Connie stared at her, dumbfounded.

“That way you can go look for the freight without worrying about it!”

Snapping back to reality, Connie shook her head vehemently.

“No, Lucia, it’s much too dangerous!”

“There’s nothing to worry about! I’m not that smart, but I’m good at bluffing!”

“B-but I couldn’t let you do that!”

Scarlett sighed.

“Lucia, please come here.”

The two of them began whispering together.

“Miss Scarlett, you’re a genius!”

“You needn’t bother stating the obvious.”

Despite her words, Scarlett seemed pleased by the glint of respect in the girl’s eyes. Left out of their circle, Connie watched, perplexed. After a moment, Lucia

ran back over to her.

“Everything will be fine, Miss Connie!”

She thumped her chest confidently and put on a broad smile.

“After all...,” she said, as if she was revealing an important secret. “I have the goddess of luck on my side!”



“I hope Lucia’s okay...,” Connie muttered, glancing back at the mansion for the hundredth time.

She and Scarlett were heading not toward Mezzaluna Pier but toward the port where Randolph and Basilio had gone. This was because there was no gondola to use at the Fargo residence. Well, strictly speaking there was an extra, but Marco—who seemed like the type to go along with their reckless plan—wasn’t at home. He’d apparently gone with Basilio and Randolph as their gondolier. And without a gondola, Connie couldn’t move around on the canal.

This meant she would have to ask Randolph and Basilio for help, and so she was walking to a pier, where she could catch a boat to the port. Incidentally, Scarlett’s mood had plunged the moment she learned they couldn’t take a gondola and go out on their own. It seemed she’d been looking forward to taking the wind out of Randolph’s sails by showing up with the freight.

Once they’d left the district filled with upper-class mansions, they came to a wide canal.

“...I wonder if Lucia’s okay.”

“Oh, be quiet. She’s fine. Unlike someone else I know, that child has a quick mind and the luck of the devil—oh!”

She clicked her tongue. Apparently, something had caught her eye.

“Scarlett?”

“Don’t look, but there’s an unmarked gondola over there. They’re watching us.”

Connie flinched but managed to keep herself from looking, though her

expression tensed.

“There are several people in the boat,” Scarlett said. “They don’t look like Daeg Gallus, but...I’ll bet they’re hoodlums hired by Gregorio. Let’s skip the boat and walk to the port.”

“W-wait, I don’t know how to get there!”

Connie had been on the island only a few days and had no sense of how it was laid out yet.

“How many times have you looked at that map in Sena Rilifarco’s book? You mean to tell me you still haven’t memorized it?”

“Um...have you?”

“Obviously.”

“Wow.”

As usual, Scarlett’s memory was supernatural.

“But you made fun of me for using a map that’s hundreds of years old...”

“I did, because tourist spots from back then would be moldy ruins by now. But the streets on the island have hardly changed. Since they’re so narrow, they haven’t been repaved or rebuilt.”

She must have been telling the truth when she claimed to have memorized the map, because she guided Connie toward the port without mishap, issuing a confident string of left-theres and straight-heres.

“If you turn left at the end of this street, you should be on the road that leads to the port.”

They’d left the main road, but there were still lots of stalls around, and everyone they passed wore a mask and fancy dress. It seemed Carnival was truly celebrated throughout the island.

Just as they were about to turn the corner of a sparsely populated street, Scarlett whispered, “Wait, that man—” Connie followed her gaze past the corner to a man in a black cloak.

“That’s the scoundrel who tried to kidnap Ulysses.”

“Are you sure?”

“Completely. His mask and costume are identical... Let’s turn around.”

But when Connie spun on her heel, she glimpsed a familiar group of thugs and groaned. It seemed the men from before had left their gondola behind to follow her. They were peering around as if searching for someone.

Scarlett clicked her tongue in irritation.

“They haven’t spotted us. Look down and keep walking.”

“O-okay.”

Connie walked timidly forward.

“Just a little farther...”

Connie held her breath and passed the men. They didn’t seem to realize it was her. But no sooner had she let out her breath in relief than one of them said suspiciously, “Hey, could that be ’er?”

Scarlett shouted, “Into the alley to the right! Then run as fast as you can!”

Connie took off sprinting. She could hear the man shouting “Stop!” behind her. Her heart was pounding. Waving both arms frantically, she screamed at Scarlett, “What do I do...?!”

“I’m trying to think!” Scarlett snapped back. A second later, she shouted, “Keep going straight! You’ll come out on Mille Street!”

“M-Mille Street...?” Connie panted. She’d walked there the day before with Randolph. It was where she’d eaten skewered clams and fried whitefish and seen the puppet theater and—

“You remember the pier there, don’t you?”

—And where she and Randolph had ridden the pedal boat.

After a while, the pier on the canal came into view. The same stout boatman was hawking his services.

“Why, if it isn’t the young lady from yesterday. And where’s your beau? ... You’re sweating buckets. So you’re training to be a racer after all, eh?”

“No...!”

Connie planted her hands on her knees and tried to catch her breath. Drops of sweat dripped from her chin onto the ground. Meanwhile, Scarlett was eyeing the rope tying a boat to the pier. Her eyes flashed, and the loose knot around the stake undid itself.

“Constance!”

Connie wiped her sweat, took a deep breath, and jumped into the boat.

“I’m sorry!” she yelled. “I need to borrow your boat for a minute!”

“You what?”

She leaned forward, grabbed the helm, and started pedaling.

“I promise I’ll bring it back later!”

“...What?! W-wait!”

She heard vague shouting but ignored it and pedaled desperately forward until the voice faded away. Soon the boat was far from the bank.

“That went well,” Scarlett said.

“...I never imagined that hellish training session would come in handy.....”

After pedaling for a while and making sure the men weren’t following her, Connie slumped over the helm. Life was so unpredictable. To cheer herself up, she said, “Right! I’ll just keep going till I get to the port. Scarlett, tell me the—”

She was about to say “way” when she realized Scarlett was staring at something behind her.

“Huh?”

“I don’t think that will work.”

“...Huhhh?”

Suppressing the bad feeling in the pit of her stomach, Connie looked slowly over her shoulder. A boat was bearing down on them with frightening speed, white spray flying around it. It wasn’t a gondola, of course. It was a vaporette, though smaller than the one she and Randolph had ridden.

“How did they get one of those...?!”

“I don’t know. It must belong to the Vecchios’ company. But our boat can make sharper turns. If we go down a narrow canal, I think we can shake them.”

“Wh-where are we going?”

To get to the port, they had to take a wide canal. Perhaps there was a more roundabout way?

“To Fanoom Shrine,” Scarlett answered simply.

“But we don’t have permission!” Connie shouted, forgetting about the men following her.

“We’ll figure something out! Bust your way in if you have to!”

“How do I do that when they have spears?!”

“Just turn the rudder! They’re catching up!”

“I swear...!”

Connie took a deep breath.

“Whatever happens, it’s not my fault!”

In the end, nothing happened. When the guards in plate armor stuck their spears toward her, Constance Grail tensed and raised both hands.

“C-can I please come in...?”

Instead of answering, they jabbed their glittering spears closer to her chest. “Right, I thought so,” Connie muttered, giving Scarlett a glance that said, *Told you so*. But her all-important partner in crime just jerked her chin away, seemingly oblivious to the crisis. To make matters worse, the vaporette Connie thought she’d shaken was rapidly approaching.

“A-a-actually those men are chasing me!” she tried pleading, but the eyes peering out from the slits in the guards’ visors remained cold.

Behind her were Gregorio’s henchmen. In front of her were the gate guards. This must be what people meant by “between a rock and a hard place.”

As a cold sweat broke out on Connie’s forehead, Scarlett sighed dramatically.

“Get out of the way, Connie. I’ll negotiate for you.”

Connie nodded eagerly and, with a now familiar sensation, let Scarlett into her body. A second later, Scarlett was hissing wrathfully, “I swear, you people. If you have a complaint, tell it to Cornelia Faris!”

Scarlett had offered to negotiate for her, but how was that negotiating? It sounded like nonsense to Connie.

She was at a loss, and the guards were looking at each other in confusion. The men behind them probably hadn’t even heard. But there was one person present who reacted to Scarlett’s words.

“I never imagined I’d hear a descendant of Percival Grail say that line.”

A beautiful woman of indeterminate age slipped from the shadows of a rock, where she had apparently been lurking.

“What has the world come to?” said Berta Neuen with an exaggerated sigh. “Well.”

She looked at Scarlett, possessing Connie’s body.

“I assume the boys back there are Gregorio’s private soldiers? They say shit attracts flies, but I must admit, they look like trouble. Did you come to interfere with religious freedom, boys? If so, you’ve no right to call yourselves Solditans.”

“Our business is with the House of Fargo’s guest over there. Not with the shrine!” one of the men shouted from the boat. “And the sea isn’t shrine territory anyway!”

Berta shrugged.

“You don’t need to shout. As long as you don’t come any closer, I’ll leave you alone. Of course, if you feel like being riddled with bullets, I won’t stop you.”

Connie tensed at those unsettling words. Scarlett glanced at the rock wall, then nodded.

“You have snipers, I see. So you throw invaders off with these prehistoric guards, then let the snipers take them down. How dangerous.”

Did that mean they had guns? Unfortunately, Connie’s eyes weren’t good

enough to see them, but she thought she caught something glinting out of the corner of her vision.

Berta narrowed her eyes and looked down at her uninvited guest.

“What did you come here for?”

Scarlett smiled slightly, unfazed by Berta’s domineering tone.

“Why, *a pilgrimage*, of course.”

Berta’s expression did not change. She continued to stare searchingly at the visitor. After a few moments, she abruptly looked away and said, “This shrine never turns away pilgrims.” Then, glancing at the vaporette, she shouted, “Hear that, boys? This girl is a pilgrim. If you refuse to leave, I will exercise my right to self-defense against persecutors as allowed by law.”

As if this speech were the signal to fire, gunshots rang out and water sprayed into the air. Warning shots. The men reversed the vaporette, looking startled.

Berta watched sternly as their boat grew smaller on the horizon, and when it had disappeared entirely, she turned back to Scarlett (who to her looked like Connie).

“So why did you really come?”

“Because this is a place that guides *the lost*.”

Berta frowned at the word “lost.”

“Sena Rilifarco, then?” she asked.

Connie finally understood why Scarlett had directed her to the shrine. The name of the travelogue was *A Lost Man’s Compass*. That star, called the traveler’s signpost and said to be a landmark in the night sky, still shone above this shrine.

In other words, this was the place the lost man’s compass pointed to.

“And why are you on a pilgrimage?”

Be a pilgrim.

That was the message hidden in Sena Rilifarco’s book. Scarlett seemed to be obeying those instructions.

“Because I’m following her advice, of course.”

Berta raised her eyebrows in surprise. Connie was confused, too.

“...Her?”

“Don’t pretend you don’t know. You’re too young to be going senile.”

Scarlett narrowed her eyes in amusement.

“After all, wasn’t Sena Rilifarco—”

Abruptly, her smile vanished.

“—Cornelia Faris?”



Constance
Grail

Seventeen-year-old nearly mistaken for a professional boat racer. A lot's been happening lately with the return of Daeg Galus, the trial with Gregorio, and now unknown enemies chasing her, and she feels like her brain is going to explode again. Seems to have become more resilient, though, since she stole a boat in broad daylight and launched an attack on the shrine without an entrance pass. Showing as much growth as Dai-Guard. ←new!



Scarlett
Castiel

Eternal sixteen-year-old who doesn't stop once she's started. The starry crown is still missing, the gunpowder was stolen, and now that damn rooster is involved again—she's really starting to get pissed. Would never admit it, but was really hoping for a normal vacation. Figures things will work out if she blames everything on Cornelia Faris. ←new!



Randolph
Ulster

Has spent about half the trip looking for freight.

Sena Rilifarco

Suddenly popped up again.



Maximilian Castiel froze, his glass at his lips.

“Well?” his father, Adolphus, asked mildly. Maximilian quietly closed his eyes, set the glass down, and wiped his mouth with a napkin.

“...I’m sorry, my memory is a tad hazy—what, exactly, did you say this was?”

He thought his father had said it was lemonade, but it wasn’t like any lemonade Maximilian had ever tasted. Maybe his father was unfamiliar with the beverage.

“Lemonade,” Adolphus replied.

It was lemonade.

“...I know this is a rude question, but has anyone else tasted it?”

“Yes. Kyle Hughes did. But he didn’t have anything useful to say, so I decided to ask you.”

“But have you tasted it yourself, Father?”

“I have not,” he answered casually. “After all, what would I do if it tasted awful?”

The duke’s smile as he spoke oozed that alluring seductiveness that made one forgive everything he did. Scarlett used to look like that, Maximilian remembered. How many times had that devilish smile convinced him to do what she wanted?

“Anyway, what do you think?”

“...I think the herbs are a tad strong. Also, the acidity of the lemon is bringing out the bitterness of the herbs and completely overpowering the honey.”

“I see,” Adolphus said, resting his hand on his chin and looking at the ceiling. “Next time I’ll focus more on balance.”

He clapped his hands together once and stood up.

“R-right now?” Maximilian asked.

“If I’m making it, I may as well make it taste good.”

“Wouldn’t tomorrow do just as well...?” Maximilian suggested, terrified he would be made taste tester again.

“There’s no point unless it’s today.”

Maximilian was momentarily perplexed. Then he remembered. *Today is...*

“...It’s Carnival,” he mumbled.

His mother, Aliénore, had taught him that this was the one day each year when the dead returned to the mortal realm. On this day, islanders prepared the favorite foods and drinks of the departed and awaited their return. Aliénore had loved lemonade. He remembered that whenever she was confined to bed, she had begged his father to make it.

“Father...”

That’s what he must have meant when he said there was no point unless it was today. Maximilian frowned, and his heart ached. Suddenly, a memory from early childhood rose in his mind. His father had given him some lemonade because he’d made too much. It wasn’t what he’d call delicious, but he remembered it as a simple mixture of lemons and honey.

How did that become this hazardous brew? The question must have been written on his face, because Adolphus said, “Aliénore said the lemonade she drank on the island was made with many different herbs. I tried to reproduce it many times, but never once received her approval. I’m hoping to finally get it right. She’s a tough one to please.”

He smiled wryly. Maximilian smiled, too.

“Isn’t the feeling what counts? I’m sure she’ll be pleased.”

“To the contrary, she’ll probably be angry at me for wasting so many lemons.”

Despite his words, Adolphus’s eyes shone nostalgically.

“Although today,” he added, looking out the window at the distant sky, “she’s probably visiting her childhood home.”



Adolphus Castiel

Hadn't intended to make a food taster of his own son, but when Maximilian started convulsing, he got worried and called Claude. As noted, far from an upstanding dad. In the end, basically used his son as a food taster, then teared up when Claude almost killed him in a rage.



Maximilian Castiel

Eldest child of the House of Castiel, and beginning to lose his grip on what lemonade actually is. Thanks to his earnest personality, gave the yellow stuff an honest try and paid for it with three days in bed. Barely has any memories of the woman who gave birth to him and thus loved and regarded Aliénore as his true mother.

There was a demon in the house. A real, live demon.

When Antonio heard that his father and their guest Randolph had returned from Cyon Port, he came downstairs and walked straight into a bloodcurdling battlefield.

“—Say that again, Lucia.”

Randolph’s face was terrifying to start with, and now it was lined with bulging blue veins. A terrifying aura emanated from his person, brutal enough to make the fiercest fiend flee. But despite being menaced by this emperor of evil’s chillingly low voice, the angel with feathery honey-colored hair and eyes like blue lakes seemed completely unfazed.

“I’ll tell you as many times as you like,” Lucia said. “An unavoidable errand came up, and Miss Connie left the house.”

The angel smiled pleasantly as she poured oil on the fire. Her bravery and skill sent rivers of cold sweat down Antonio’s back.

“...And what exactly was this unavoidable errand?”

“I believe she said she was going to get the freight back.”

“The *freight*, you say?” Randolph asked, his eyebrows flying up. A black haze seemed to materialize behind him, elevating him from demon to demon king. Antonio yelped.

“Oh, I mean the firecrackers.”

“I know. What I mean is, the freight has already been transported off the island.”

“No, it seems it’s still here.”

“...Did Constance say that?”

“No, Miss Constance was surprised to hear it.”

Antonio was bewildered. Who could have told Constance Grail such a thing? She had been alone in the drawing room at the time. But Randolph didn't seem to find this strange and instead heaved a very long sigh.

"...How long ago did she leave? And did she say where she was going?"

He seemed to have scrubbed all emotion from his low voice as he rubbed his temples tiredly.

"She left about half an hour ago. She didn't say where she was going. I understand why you're worried, Mr. Randolph, but I'm sure she'll be fine. After all, she has the divine protection of a goddess."

"I think you mean an evil spirit," the demon said, his eyes half-closed. The angel laughed her usual tinkling laugh.

"And so we decided that I would take her place in the trial!" she announced proudly.

"Out of the question."

For once, Antonio agreed with the demon. But Lucia just blinked at him, puzzled.

"Why?"

"Because you're still a child."

"Abby told me it's poor manners to speak of a lady's age."

"...Let me rephrase that. It's too dangerous."

Antonio didn't know who Abby was, but she seemed to have the demon's respect. Still, Lucia didn't seem put off by the mention of danger. To the contrary, she dove further into the conversation.

"Do you mean because Carlo's father is working with Daeg Gallus?"

Randolph didn't answer, but his silence was answer enough. Predictably, a lovely smile crossed Lucia's face.

"In that case, I think it's even more important that I take part in the trial. Gregorio will probably be there."

"How do you know that?"

“It seems he wants the gondola back. We are to bring it to the trial today, aren’t we?”

“The gondola?”

Randolph frowned.

“Why, yes, that’s what *she* said. Though I’m sorry, I don’t know the reason.”

There was silence as Randolph considered this. After a moment, he let out a resigned sigh.

“...Fine. I’ll attend the trial. You stay here.”

This was probably his idea of a compromise. But Lucia shook her head.

“I can’t agree,” she said.

“Lucia, this is not a game. We are dealing with a highly dangerous man—a man who would not hesitate to commit murder.”

Lucia did not so much as flinch at his harsh words.

“That’s exactly why I insist,” she said, her unclouded eyes looking straight into Randolph’s. “Gregorio is a very bad man, yes? But the reason he has not yet been arrested is that there is no evidence against him. I think using the trial to bushwhack him will be the most effective.”

“Bushwhack...?” Antonio mumbled. He’d never heard that word before. Maybe it was something people in Adelbide said. Lucia must have heard him and offered an explanation.

“It means to make a sneak attack. It’s Rudy’s specialty.”

“A sneak attack, eh?” Randolph echoed. Antonio was shivering at the unsettling words coming from her angelic mouth. Who was this suspicious stranger who specialized in sneak attacks? Rudy sounded like a man’s name—like the kind of hooligan who would take off in a stolen gondola. Was innocent little Lucia being hoodwinked by him?

Randolph continued with the same severe expression.

“Even so, it needn’t be you who does it.”

“It’s what they call process of elimination,” she answered. “You are an

investigator in Adelbide. If Abby were here, she'd say that if you start cracking down on crimes in other countries, you'll start a turf war."

Antonio was lost again. A turf war? But there wasn't much grass on El Sol...

"If Mr. Antonio goes, it will pointlessly provoke Gregorio's enmity. Uly is beyond considering. That leaves me as the only choice."

Randolph looked at the daintily smiling child and pressed a hand to his forehead like he had a headache.

"...I can see now why Aldous Clayton kept reminding me to look after you."

"I wish Rudy would stop treating me like a baby! Can't he see I'm a proper lady now?!"

Lucia puffed her cheeks out in irritation.

"I can see your point," Randolph admitted. "But I still can't let you go. I'll find someone else to represent Connie."

As the girl pouted, Antonio heard someone near the door say in a soft voice, "Lieutenant Commander Ulster?" Antonio turned around and saw it was Ulysses. He was supposed to be in bed, but he must have been feeling better. Antonio was relieved to see that the color had returned to his face.

A faint smile played over Ulysses's delicate, feminine features.

"Gregorio was brazen enough to use his own merchant ship to commit a crime, wasn't he? I think sending a child to oppose him would be a good way to bring down his guard."

"Your Highness," Randolph said reprovingly. "Did you hear the conversation just now? He wants the Vecchio gondola back, it seems. If that's true, then there's a good chance he'll use violence to seize it, regardless of the trial's outcome. I cannot place Lucia in the line of fire in such a dangerous situation."

"Ah," Ulysses mumbled to himself. Then he narrowed his violet eyes and smiled mischievously.

"Then I'll go with her. That will give us a reason to bring guards."

"Uly!" Lucia cried, throwing her arms around him in gratitude. Randolph

watched with a sour face.

“Your Highness, please remember your position,” he admonished.

“I do. As you know, I’m no longer in line to inherit the crown, and I believe it is the job of the royal family to protect our subjects.”

“Your subjects live in a different kingdom.”

“Then let’s say I’m buying myself some favors from the O’Brians,” he joked. Lucia’s hand shot into the air.

“You shall have them!” she said pertly. Then, seeming to realize the implications of this, she looked down despondently and added, “...Or, you shall have them once I’ve made my way in the world.”

Ulysses blinked in surprise, then giggled. Unlike the grown-up smile of a moment before, this carefree expression better suited his age.

“I’m only joking. I already owe you more than I can ever pay back, Lucia. For that reason, Lieutenant Commander, will you please let me join her?”

The crease between Randolph’s brows deepened.

“Oh, I have an idea!” Lucia cried. “You can help, too, Mr. Randolph!”

“I thought you just said I couldn’t.”

Antonio had been thinking the same thing. Didn’t she say he shouldn’t get involved because he would start a “turf war”?

She giggled, covered her mouth, and then said with odd excitement, “I have the perfect strategy! I was planning to ask Lord Basilio for his help, but you’re a much better fit for the job, Mr. Randolph!”

“...I have a very bad feeling about this,” he said. “Can I ask who devised this strategy of yours?”

Lucia’s expression brightened. Looking up at Randolph with sparkling eyes, she began, “Why, of course it was Sc—”

“I see,” he interrupted. “I’m sorry I asked.”



At the arrival of the head priestess, the guards lowered their spears. They each placed a hand on their chest, bowed slightly, and returned to their stations.

Berta rolled her shoulders irritably and looked Connie in the eye before gesturing to the stone stairs with her chin. Apparently, Connie was to go up.

Scarlett, still occupying Connie's body, snorted with dissatisfaction. Connie knew how much she hated to be told what to do, but right now she wasn't gorgeous, sexy Scarlett Castiel—she was plain old Constance Grail, so Connie wished she would act a little more restrained.

Connie was beside herself as they climbed the endless stairs. The reason, of course, was Scarlett's comment by the gate.

Sena Rilifarco was Cornelia Faris?

What in the world could she mean?

"And how, may I ask, did you get such a ridiculous idea into your head?" Berta said, having reached the top of the stairs before Scarlett.

"It may be ridiculous, but it's true, isn't it?" Scarlett asked confidently.

"Then what about Sylvia Latué?"

In a corner of her mind, Connie whispered, *Oh!* Sylvia Latué was the blind saint who had married the son of the sovereign. It was an open secret that she had been an imperial princess in the country she fled.

"You must know Aliénore was descended from Sylvia," Berta went on.

Connie didn't just know that—she had heard it from Aliénore's daughter herself.

"Yes," Scarlett agreed. Apparently, she didn't intend to deny that Sylvia was Cornelia. "But wasn't Sylvia supposed to be frail? And hardly ever seen in public? Who would know if she lived a double life? Traveling throughout the kingdom, for instance."

Like Sena Rilifarco, who was constantly making his way to one place or another.

Berta scowled like the very idea was absurd.

“Cornelia was the sole surviving member of the imperial family, and thus a target of the new regime,” she said. “That was why she used illness as a pretext to withdraw from the world. Why would she go out of her way to put herself at risk?”

“Well then, why did the Republic of Soldita put itself at risk by taking in Cornelia Faris? Considering the gap in power between the two countries at the time, Soldita would logically want to avoid making an enemy of a superpower like Faris.”

“I suppose because the son of the sovereign fell in love with Cornelia while she was studying abroad.”

“That’s a poor joke,” Scarlett replied, snorting and narrowing her eyes. “During the war, Soldita declared itself neutral, but the situation was a tinderbox waiting to explode. And back then, Soldita was a small, undeveloped republic with no political power.”

“...So?”

“So it made an alliance.”

“With a teenage girl?”

“Of course not. With *Adelbide*.”

Berta’s face went blank.

“At the time, Adelbide had just proclaimed its independence from the Principality of East Faris. Everyone knew full well it would lead to war, and they were monitoring movements in Faris. If the worst came to pass, Cornelia Faris’s bloodline could serve as a trump card. But harboring her in Adelbide itself would be too great a risk. So they made a proposition to Soldita, most likely on the condition that they would defend the smaller country if problems arose. The fact that Soldita was an island made hiding her even easier.”

Scarlett was reeling this off as smoothly as if she’d seen it happen herself.

“Several decades ago, Faris got wind that a direct descendent of Cornelia was in Soldita and appeared ready to intervene. Shortly after that, because of a

secret promise made hundreds of years earlier, Aliénore was married off in Adelbide.”

“...Has anyone ever told you that you have a very vivid imagination?”

“No, but I do have a reputation for great intuition. Incidentally, Percival Grail was likely key in securing her asylum.”

Connie was in shock.

Percival Grail had something to do with Cornelia Faris?

Had she been in control of her body, she would have surely yelped in surprise.

For Connie, this was a momentous revelation, but Berta seemed uninterested. She tilted her head slightly.

“I’m not all that familiar with Adelbide’s history, but didn’t he make a mark in the Ten Years’ War and receive his title for it? I’m sorry to tell you, but by then, Cornelia Faris had long fled her native kingdom.”

“How am I supposed to know what was happening back then? We’re not talking about the sort of thing a person gets public recognition for. But I know there was some link between the two of them. Otherwise, Cornelia Faris would never have given a book to an upstart from Adelbide.”

“He probably came across it by chance. But before we get to any of that,” Berta said, narrowing her eyes. “What’s your proof that Sena Rilifarco was Cornelia Faris?”

“Oh, that?”

Scarlett shrugged casually.

“If you rearrange the letters in Sena Rilifarco, you get Cornelia Faris.”

“What...?”

“She really did love wordplay. But I can’t understand why she would want to expose her identity like that. What could she have been thinking?”

Berta stared in bewilderment, perhaps because she hadn’t expected such an answer. Finally, she gave a deflated sigh and said, “She probably wasn’t thinking anything.”

Scarlett brought her hand to her mouth and sneered.

“So you admit that I’m right?”

“I’d like to point out that I never once said you were wrong.”

At these blunt words, Scarlett’s conceited expression turned to displeasure.

“...You’re quibbling.”

Berta shrugged, and Scarlett continued sourly.

“And what do you mean, she wasn’t thinking anything?”

“Well, the only way we can know about someone long dead is to read through old documents—and the one thing I know about Cornelia Faris is that she was the greediest woman I’ve ever heard of.”

“Greedy?”

“Yes indeed. After all, she gave up her home, her name, and her entire life just so she could keep on living.”

Berta spoke fluidly, like she had explained this many times before.

“I’ve studied a little history, you see. There was a time when I was looking into Cornelia’s story... As you say, Adelbide took the lead in Cornelia Faris’s search for asylum. But it seems that she herself was the one who negotiated with the sovereign of Soldita. She had the knowledge, conduct, and courage befitting a member of the imperial family. She used those as her weapons when promoting herself.”

Connie sensed Cornelia’s indomitable spirit in the words “promoting herself.”

“She vowed to devote herself to the Republic, and in exchange asked for eternal protection for herself and her descendants.”

It was an absurd request to bring to the table, but it reminded Connie of a certain someone she knew.

“And true to her word, she seems to have been one of the most outstanding members of Il Rosso. But though she promised to serve the Republic, everything she did was to reach her own goal.”

“What goal?”

“You said it yourself. If you have a complaint, tell it to Cornelia Faris.”

“...What do you mean?”

“Aliénore used to say the same thing. She said she learned it from her mother. Listen to me. Cornelia Faris was a chillingly intelligent woman. And greedy, too, and unbelievably egotistical.”

Just like someone I know, Connie thought.

“And though she knew better than anyone the horror of the bloodline of the starry crown, she was cold-hearted enough to pass that fate on to the next generation without a second thought.”

Berta laughed cynically.

“You think a woman like that would leave behind a family motto with no meaning?”

“This shrine is a stronghold, isn’t it,” Scarlett said, her expression changing from suspicion to realization.

Berta gave a small nod and said hatefully, “Cornelia Faris spent her life completing this shrine.”

Connie guessed this meant more than simply buying the land and building the structures.

“Freedom of religion and adherence to the law. As you probably know, those are both core principles of this Republic.”

“Yes.”

“They were part of the culture here to start with, but it was Cornelia’s great achievement to formalize them to the extent you see now. As a member of Il Rosso, she cracked down on oppressors, made every effort to improve the laws, and ultimately turned a simple religious site into a legally inviolable stronghold. You saw it in action when I turned away Gregorio’s henchmen earlier.”

Connie recalled what Berta had said. If the shrine deemed someone a persecutor, it was permitted to use violence to defend itself.

Berta looked up at the white shrine towering above them on the cliff.

“This is holy ground, you see.”

A place to protect children who might one day be forced to shoulder a cruel fate. Cornelia Faris used Soldita itself to achieve that end, Berta said.

“Even the most timid of birds can soar freely so long as it has a nest to return to. That is the meaning of the family motto.”

If you have a complaint, tell it to Cornelia Faris.

“The truth is, neither sovereign nor criminal kingpin can easily interfere with this place. After all, it’s shrouded in a veil of awe cultivated over centuries.”

“...Much like a certain family’s tradition of sincerity,” Scarlett muttered. Berta didn’t hear her.

“But it’s strange,” Berta added. “To me, this place looks more like a cage.”

“...A cage?” Scarlett asked.

“Yes. Or if not that, then a curse binding Cornelia’s descendants.” The priestess smiled, but her expression was clouded. As Connie wondered what this meant, Scarlett said to her, “I don’t like when things get gloomy,” and slipped out of her body.

“Come in. I’ll get you a cup of tea at least.”

“...No, I should be going.”

Connie let out a long breath and shook her head. She looked up. It was already twilight. The round evening sun tinted the sky red as it sank slowly toward the sea. She probably wouldn’t make it back in time for the trial. Still, before the decision was handed down—no, as soon as humanly possible—she wanted to retrieve the firecrackers.

“Lady Berta.”

Connie looked straight into Berta’s dark brown eyes.

“Thank you for saving me.”

As she bowed her head, she heard an irritated sigh.

“How do you intend to return? The men who followed you here are surely waiting near the entrance.”

“Oh...”

“I suppose it can’t be helped. Follow me.”

Clearly annoyed, Berta gestured for Connie to follow and brought her to the back side of the shrine. The cliff here was so sheer, a single misstep would have sent Connie plunging headfirst into the ocean. Looking toward it, she glimpsed a steel ladder between the trees. It was simply made, fastened slipshod to the roughly hewn rock face, and barely wide enough for one person. She looked down; cold wind blew up at her. The ladder looked like it led all the way to the ocean. Of course, falling would mean instant death. The blood drained from Connie’s face at the dizzying view.

“Do you know why she designed such a conspicuous front gate and posted armed guards there?” Berta asked as Connie stood rooted to the spot. “To make it easier to escape in an emergency.”

She explained that the bay at the bottom of this ladder was on the opposite side of the island from the front gate, and there was a cave nearby with an emergency boat waiting inside.

“I’ll feel bad if anything happens to you. Take the boat.”

Berta extended her palm. Connie laughed dryly, withdrew a few coins from her purse, and put them in Berta’s hand. Then, more to make her own feet move than anything else, she whispered, “I—I guess I have no choice.”

There was no other way out. She took a deep breath and gathered her courage. Then, shaking like a newborn fawn, she put one foot hesitantly on the ladder. Rung by rung, not looking down, she descended until finally she reached solid ground. As Berta had promised, there was a cave by the shore. In it was something long and narrow, covered in black cloth. When she peeled the cloth back, a time-worn rowboat appeared.

“This is...,” Connie began.

Scarlett frowned.

“Can you manage this thing? I think the pedal boat would be—”

“No, this is perfect...!” Connie declared. The boat was neatly symmetrical, not

like a gondola with a wider left gunwale. Connie rowed boats like this every summer in the Grail domain. “In fact, I’ve been called Constance the Swan...!”

“Are you sure they didn’t mean to say duckling?”

Incomprehensible.

Regardless of her spiteful remarks, Scarlett was taken by surprise once the other girl began rowing. Connie looked back at Scarlett and laughed proudly but nearly rowed straight into some rocks when she did.

“Eeek...!” she yelped, hurriedly reversing course.

“Look where you’re going! Didn’t Randolph Ulster tell you not to get distracted by the scenery?!”

Connie finally made it back to El Sol just before the sun set. She tied up the boat on a nearly empty side canal off the high street. She’d wanted to go straight to Mezzaluna Pier, but the men following her knew she was traveling by boat. The canals were probably being watched, so she decided to walk to the bridge instead.

Though the sky grew darker as she walked, lanterns hung at even intervals along the streets, the stalls were bustling with people, and the crowds showed no sign of thinning. Peering around cautiously, Connie passed through Mille Street and caught sight of the bridge shaped like a half moon. A rope was hung across the road to keep people out, but it wasn’t guarded, so she slipped under it.

Grabbing the railing, she inspected the canal underneath. Maybe because the event had been canceled so suddenly, quite a few gondolas were still bobbing on the water. Gregorio Vecchio’s gondola must have been among them, but of course, she had no idea which one it was. Almost none of the gondolas had crests, presumably because they were meant for incognito excursions. She had no idea what to do. As she racked her brain, Scarlett pointed to one of the boats.

“I’m sure it’s that one.”

“...Huh?”

Her slender finger was pointing to a black gondola anchored near the center of the canal.

“H-how do you know...?!” Connie blurted out.

“All the boats are about the same size, but that one isn’t rocking in the wind. That means it must have something very heavy in it.”

Connie gaped at her.

“Close that stupid-looking mouth of yours,” Scarlett scolded her. Connie clapped a hand over her mouth.

“But what should we do now...?”

The freight was on the water. There weren’t any boats nearby that looked usable.

“Do you think we should swim?” she asked.

“You idiot. Even if we managed to get near, how would we carry the freight?”

“Oh, right...”

“Also, I’m sure they have a lookout posted. They’ll spot us if we do anything stupid.”

That would be a shame, after they’d made it so far. Connie bit her lip. If they didn’t put an end to this here, more people might get hurt. Gradually, her sadness boiled over into anger. In fact, if it weren’t for this situation, everyone would be having a good time at the festival right now! And yet—

As she clenched her fists, Scarlett called out to her.

“Hey, Connie.”

Her jewel-like eyes sparkled with amusement. Connie had a bad feeling about that look, and it wasn’t baseless speculation—it came from cold, hard experience.

“Daeg Gallus wants those firecrackers, right?”

Connie nodded, breaking out in a cold sweat at the ominous power in Scarlett’s voice. What she said was true. Daeg Gallus had killed innocent people and sunk a ship for the freight on that boat. The flames of the watchfire atop

the bridge suddenly flickered in the wind. Scarlett's amethyst eyes caught the red glow of the flames.

She smiled her most seductive smile and spoke a line befitting an infamous villain.

"Then let's make sure they never get the chance to use them."



Ugh, I hate this place.

Carlo Vecchio grimaced at the pompous atmosphere of the courtroom. He felt restless and nervous, as if something were crawling around in the pit of his stomach. It was an ominous feeling, as if he'd accidentally stepped into a hole someone had randomly dug by the side of the road and now he was plunging toward an abyss.

His luck had been off since morning. He'd had a hell of a time peeling the boiled egg he was served at breakfast, and there was a crack in his favorite teacup. The moment he stepped out of the mansion, his shoelace tore, a bird shit on him, and a black cat sitting on top of a garden wall raised the fur on its back and hissed when he walked past.

Days like this typically did not go well.

The courtroom was in the former auditorium of the charitable hospital. Its height spanned multiple stories, with a round skylight in the ceiling and tapestries of the sun and moon hanging on the wall. Through the glass overhead, Carlo could see stars shining in the night sky.

Long tables were set to the right and left of the judge's bench. Carlo was seated at the plaintiff's table, which was on the left if you were facing the judge. Needless to say, Gregorio was next to him.

Probably because it was Carnival, there were hardly any spectators in the courtroom. Most of the people there had some connection to the case. Toward the back, Carlo saw Antonio Fargo, his frivolous-looking servant, and a boy with blond hair and blue eyes. The boy had a breathtakingly delicate, handsome face. Several guards were nearby, evidently protecting the boy. Sprawled rudely in the front row, and looking very much like they had something to hide, were

Giacomo and Tomas—two henchmen Gregorio had trained from a young age.

Donatello, who was sitting on the raised judge's bench, banged his wooden gavel. Court was now in session.

"Representatives, come forward," he ordered.

But it was not the impudent, plain girl with the pale green eyes who rose from the defendant's table. Instead, it was a child with honey-colored hair and rosy lips. Her face, as pretty as a porcelain doll's, was still childish, as sweet and innocent as a flower bud.

"You must be Constance Grail's representative. Your name?"

"Lucia O'Brian."

She did not shrink from this room full of adults, but instead answered in a voice as dainty as a silver bell. Even Carlo, who hated children, was charmed. However, he knew well that there were people in the world who could not be moved even by such sweetness.

"You're telling me to argue my case to this child?"

The mocking voice was coming from immediately beside him. Carlo shrank back as quickly as if cold water had been poured down his back.

"Obviously that Gale girl or Rail girl or whatever her name is has no common sense. If she did, she wouldn't have stolen someone else's property to start with. I suppose I wasted my time hoping for more. You've brought my gondola, I hope?"

The girl called Lucia seemed unmoved by Gregorio's overbearing tone.

"Of course I have!" she answered pertly. Gregorio stroked his chin in satisfaction.

"I'm glad to hear it. I'm a busy man. Let's get down to business. Carlo, stand up."

Carlo rose slowly. The second he did, pain shot through his instep. He grimaced.

"See that, Judge? My son's cheeks are hollow, and he's got black circles under

his eyes. He's so terrified he can't sleep at night. I checked the records from the trial by combat, and that—sorry, what was her name?"

"Constance Grail, Gregorio Vecchio."

"Yes, that's it. Miss Grail's statements clearly crossed a line. What she did was an act of violence."

Without raising an eyebrow, the white-haired judge shifted his gaze to Lucia.

"Do you have a counterargument?"

The little girl tilted her head slightly before asking Gregorio, "Is the person Mr. Carlo is afraid of really Miss Connie?"

"What did you say?"

Her clear blue eyes kept peering at Gregorio, unintimidated by his threatening attitude.

"To me, it seems like he is afraid of you, not of Miss Connie."

"Wha—"

Gregorio was shocked into silence—but only for a second. Then anger flushed his face and he made to speak, but Lucia ignored him and turned to Carlo.

"Mr. Carlo, how did you get those bruises around your eyes? And you seem to have injured your foot as well. It looked very painful when you stood up."

"He fell because he was tired from not sleeping. Didn't you, Carlo?" Gregorio answered.

There was finality in his voice. Carlo took a breath, pushing down the emotions surging inside him.

"...Yes, Father."

Carlo wasn't as shocked as he might have been. Anyway, he'd known it from the start...

...this wasn't going to be a good day.

"My son agrees that while he would like to sue for hospital fees, he was partially to blame for the incident, given how it came about. That's why we are

asking only for the return of the gondola.”

“Wouldn’t an apology do?” the girl asked very quietly.

“What?”

“If you’re truly doing this for Carlo, isn’t an apology from Miss Grail—the one you say hurt him—what he really needs?”

“Excuse me?”

“You seem very angry right now, Mr. Gregorio. But I don’t think you’re angry because Carlo has been hurt. Why do you want the gondola back so badly?”

Gregorio stiffened, then clicked his tongue in irritation. The sound was surprisingly loud, and Donatello narrowed his eyes at this disrespectful behavior in his sacred court.

“Gregorio Vecchio, answer the defendant’s question. Is there some reason?”

“Well, it’s...”

He floundered briefly before pasting a cunning smile on his face.

“Because it was unjustly stolen from us, of course. Miss Grail is no different from a highway robber. We must right this wrong. Honorable Judge, you know I’m doing this for the sake of my injured son, don’t you?”

Lucia interrupted.

“I’d like to hear what Carlo thinks.”

“It doesn’t matter what he thinks!” Gregorio shouted. He must have responded on reflex. A guilty expression quickly appeared on his face as silence fell over the courtroom.

“If you’re saying you’re here to right a wrong,” said Lucia, breaking the lull, “then you’re the one who should be on trial, Mr. Gregorio.”

She had a willfulness in her eyes far beyond her years.

“Your Honor...this sudden outburst is obviously in contempt of court,” Gregorio objected, looking stunned. The voice that answered him was terribly calm.

“I can see their hands,” Lucia said, staring straight at Gregorio. “There are so many of them. Mr. Gregorio, you’ve done a lot of things in your life to make people hate you.”

“...What are you talking about?” he asked, confused.

The girl closed her eyes and acted like she was listening to something.

“Tonino,” she suddenly whispered. It was a person’s name. Without context, the word set the courtroom on edge. “Ricardo, Diego, Giovanni.”

Yes, these were names, clearly. Carlo was wondering what the girl was up to when it suddenly hit him.

They were the names of the ship’s crew.

“Angelo, Giulliano—”

She was reciting the names of the men who had been aboard the merchant ship when it sank the other day. Carlo had met these men occasionally through the Vecchio family business and was familiar with most of their names. But how did this girl know them?

“They’re crying that *their throats burn*.”

Gregorio gasped. Carlo didn’t understand what she meant. The boat had sunk, which meant the crew had surely died from drowning.

“Y-Your Honor! This child is crazy!” Gregorio screeched. “What she’s just recited are the names of men who worked at my company and who died in the recent shipwreck! This profaning of the dead must not be tolerated! I, at least, will not stand for it! Giacomo! Tomas! Throw this repugnant child out of the court!”

He turned to face the spectator seating and pointed in a frenzy at his henchmen. Giacomo and Tomas stood up. Lucia’s eyes widened. At that very moment, the courtroom door flew open, and a man walked slowly in.

“What...?”

A mask covered the man’s face. His military boots slapped the floor as he strode confidently between the spectators. Everyone in the room was struck silent. Even Judge Donatello appeared frozen in shock. The masked man was

wearing a cloak as red as blood. Could it really be—

“Il Rosso...?” Tomas murmured in amazement. Carlo thought he sounded idiotic, but the very same question was occupying his own mind.

The pitch-black mask that brought to mind the grim reaper.

The red hood that fell low over the man’s face.

The well-proportioned body, evident even beneath the cloak, and the overbearing aura that seemed to say, *I’ll cut you down if you come too close.*

Tension ran through the court, and Carlo gulped. Giacomo snorted theatrically.

“You fool, Tomas. That’s no more than a story to scare children.”

“B-but look at his clothing!”

“A costume, no more. They sell them at the night market.”

He was right—Il Rosso didn’t exist anymore. But then who was this man? The mask hid his expression, but there was something weird about him, as if ominous black flames were rising from his whole body.

“Giacomo Conte, Tomas Bonato.”

The man’s voice was flat and completely emotionless.

“He knows our names...!” Tomas exclaimed, clearly upset.

“The boss just said them!” Giacomo snapped.

Right. Gregorio had said their names, and the man must have heard him. *Wait, no.* Carlo’s face twitched. His father had said only their first names. So how did the man know their last names? Cold sweat trickled down Carlo’s cheek.

“Giacomo, you have twice inflicted bodily injury on persons in the Anselm District slum. Tomas, you committed theft at a jeweler’s shop on Regalo Street.”

It must have been true, because not only Tomas but Giacomo, too, turned white.

“What of it? What’s that got to do with this?” Giacomo shouted, evidently trying to hide his fear. When the man answered, his voice was as cold as a steel knife held to the men’s necks.

“I know what you’ve done.”

A chill ran down Carlo’s back. Every Solditan had heard that famous line at least once. It was the stock phrase of Il Rosso, the one they used in puppet shows at festivals. You didn’t have to be a real Il Rosso to say it. But the domineering aura of the masked man made it impossible for Carlo to brush it off as a bad joke.

It seemed Tomas could no longer handle the pressure. In a voice close to tears, he shouted, “I was just following orders!”

“Hey, Tomas...!” The muscles in Giacomo’s face tensed.

“Master Gregorio told me to do it!” Tomas continued. “He told us to take the firecrackers on the merchant ship to Mezzaluna Pier! We planned to move them again as soon as the men from the Maritime Bureau stopped hanging around! We never imagined the gondola with the hidden key would be taken to the Fargo residence!”

The hand of the clerk recording his statement froze. He looked at the judge.

“Gregorio Vecchio,” the masked man said, taking a step forward. “You know a man by the name of Roberto Forte at the Chamber of Commerce, I believe? He confessed everything.”

The next instant, Gregorio took off running like a frightened hare. But the masked man must have been expecting this, because he cut off Gregorio’s path, grabbed his hands, and twisted his wrists outward, with the thumbs pointing down. Gregorio screamed in pain. Ignoring him, the man brought him to his knees and tied his hands with practiced motions.

Giacomo and Tomas tried to run, too, but the guards sitting with the spectators easily caught them. As Carlo stared in astonishment, he heard the boys in the back talking.

“I’m glad they fessed up so quick. I knew Lucia could do it. The clerk wrote it all down, and the judge is a witness. I’m sure he’ll be prosecuted right away.”

“The demon king is so scary!”

Carlo was certain he’d be arrested next, but for some reason he wasn’t. The man in the red cloak removed his mask in front of the judge’s bench and, still looking dour, apologized to Donatello.

“I’m sorry for causing a disturbance in your court.”

“I was told in advance that a witness would be coming. Although I must admit I didn’t expect a member of Il Rosso to appear.”

Carlo recognized the man’s sharp eyes. If he wasn’t mistaken, it was the same man who had been with that obnoxious young woman Constance Grail.

In other words—

They’d been set up.

Carlo sighed. So his premonition had been right. This had been a truly bad day. But for some reason, he felt like a weight that had been crushing his heart for a long time had grown somewhat lighter. Embarrassed, he looked up at the ceiling.

Beyond the round skylight, a star like a crown shone a little brighter than the others, as if guiding him through the dark sky.



In the wake of this surprise detective drama, courthouse staff bustled in and out of the room. According to the clerk, island police officers would be arriving soon.

Grinning, Lucia ran up to the young man in the red cloak just as he finished talking to Donatello.

“Mr. Randolph, you were incredible!”

“Ah, Lucia. Nicely done.”

“Like I told you, I’m a proper lady!” she giggled.

Scarlett’s plan had been simple: intimidate them into confessing. That was all.



*

Oh, and what if we had a member of Il Rosso suddenly appear in court in the middle of the trial?

Since Il Rosso was a common theme in admonitions from parents and grandparents and even children's puppet plays, the people of Soldita instinctively feared the red-caped figures. Scarlett had used that fear.

"But, Mr. Randolph, where did you get your information?" Lucia asked, referring to the man at the Chamber of Commerce who had been the final nail in Gregorio's coffin. She was sure he hadn't known before the trial began.

"Lady Fargo told me as I was leaving."

"Lady Daniella?"

"Yes. She has many friends."

Lucia remembered Connie saying that Daniella belonged to a gossip club. That must have been where she'd learned the key information.

Just then, Lucia noticed that Randolph looked upset.

"Mr. Randolph? You don't look very happy..."

"No, it's just, I know it's a bit late for this, but I wish I wasn't wearing this embarrassing outfit."

He looked down at himself. Just in case, he'd put on his Royal Security Force uniform under the cape, but other than that, it was an authentic Il Rosso costume. He seemed a bit shy about it. Lucia squeezed her fists and shook her head dramatically.

"Oh, no, it looks wonderful on you! I feel like I'm watching an opera in the capital! I only wish Miss Connie could see you...!"

"I'd rather she didn't."

The red cape had been in the dressing room of the Fargo residence. It was patterned on military clothing and fit Randolph like a glove.

"You delivered that line so perfectly, too! You stared at them like this and said, 'I know what you've done!'"

“Lucia, I mean it,” he pleaded, an unusual gesture coming from him. But just as Lucia was tilting her head in puzzlement—

The sound of an explosion thundered through the courtroom.

The building shook slightly, and a bit of sawdust drifted down from the ceiling. Lucia looked back at Randolph in surprise.

“Do you think that was Miss Connie?”

“...I’m praying it wasn’t.”

The courthouse staff rushed outside to see what had happened and came back chattering excitedly.

“Firecrackers!”

“It was the firecrackers!”

“I’m not sure what happened, but a whole lot of firecrackers are going off near Mezzaluna Bridge!”

Lucia stared at Randolph.

“So it *was* Miss Connie,” she said.

“.....I don’t want to think about it.”



Half an hour earlier, Connie was standing on top of the desolate Mezzaluna Pier, looking foolish.

Then let’s make sure they never get the chance to use them.

Scarlett was talking about the firecrackers, of course. Her declaration had come as they realized they couldn’t move the freight. It all sounded a bit reckless to Connie. What exactly did she plan to do?

“...You don’t mean...?” Connie asked timidly. Scarlett grinned at her.

“If we can’t move them, then we might as well set them off here.”

“Set them off...”

Had she really heard such a disturbing phrase, or had it been her imagination? It must have been her imagination.

“All right, Connie, we need some branches.”

“...What for?”

“Why, to light in that watchfire and throw onto the boat, of course.”

Nope, not her imagination.

“Oh no, no, no...!”

That would most definitely be a crime. Not a gray area or an off-white area, but a pitch-black crime. Scarlett, however, did not appreciate Connie’s concerns.

“What, you want us to slink away without doing anything?”

“No, I was just thinking we could go get Randolph and—”

“How do you know that the bad guys won’t set a trap in the meantime?”

“Uh...”

Scarlett was right. Still, setting the firecrackers off seemed like a rather extreme measure. People weren’t allowed in this area, but what if someone happened to be in the gondola?

Scarlett must have guessed Connie’s thoughts, because she gestured with her chin to the boats below the pier.

“It’s fine, no one’s in those boats. You know how good my eyes are.”

“B-but what if the fire spread to another gondola?”

That would involve people who had nothing to do with this. Scarlett snorted with profound disinterest.

“So what?”

“Scarlett!”

“No one’s going to die from a boat catching fire.”

Connie’s green eyes widened.

“We don’t know what those louts are planning to do with the gunpowder,” Scarlett went on, “but it will definitely be something bad.”

That was true. Whatever Daeg Gallus did would probably hurt a lot of people. They might even kill without a second thought.

Like they had on the sunken ship.

“Well, what are you going to do?” Scarlett asked. Connie bit her lip and looked up.

“I’m in...!”

She didn’t know how she looked just then, but it must have been pretty pathetic, because Scarlett’s face relaxed into a smile.

Once they’d made up their minds, things went quickly. Connie gathered some branches. There was a park a short walk from the bridge and tree-lined streets nearby, which together yielded a surprising haul. When she tied them together with a shoelace, the bundle was about as thick as her wrist.

Next, she lit her makeshift torch in the watchfire atop its wooden tripod and took aim from the top of the bridge. Raising her arm high, she launched the bundle in a gentle arc toward the canal.

“Yes!” she exclaimed as it sailed through the air, but she had overestimated her own athleticism. The torch abruptly slowed and plummeted toward the water well short of the gondola.

“Ah!”

Just then, a strong wind blew past her and lifted the projectile before it was sucked toward the ocean.

“Scarlett...!”

It fortuitously fell right onto the gondola. But now they had another problem...

“Doesn’t the fire look a bit weak?” she asked.

“...It does,” Scarlett agreed.

From what Connie could see, the branch didn’t seem to be burning very well. It was sure to go out before the flames reached the firecrackers. Frantic to find something that might help, she dumped out her bag. A handkerchief, a hand

mirror, and a coin purse tumbled to the ground. Then came the bottle of sniffing brandy from the Fargos' head maid and the box of matches Daniella had given her at the coffeehouse.

"Oh, I think that will work," Scarlett said.

"What?"

Scarlett told her to stuff the handkerchief into the mouth of the bottle of spirits. Connie did as instructed.

"...Why do you know how to do this, Scarlett?"

"All ladies do."

What sort of lady does she mean? Connie wondered as she touched the match to the mouth of the bottle.

"Oooh, hot!"

She threw it as hard as she could off the bridge. As before, it started out sailing through the air in a nice arc. But given what had happened last time, she didn't expect it to hit its mark. Instead, she stared pleadingly at Scarlett, who sighed in exasperation.

The wind picked up and corrected the bottle's course.

Scarlett skillfully manipulated the wind so that the bottle fell onto the gondola. There was a quiet shattering sound, and this time the fire spread in a flash. Roaring flames crawled over the freight like a wild animal, and then they heard a popping sound. Something that looked like static electricity flickered.

A moment later, a huge explosion thundered through the air.

"Whoa...!"

The bridge shook. Connie grabbed the rail in a panic. White smoke was billowing from the gondola. Behind the smoke, the violent explosions continued like gunfire, and the flashes of light grew and overlapped one another. It was like a thundercloud full of lightning. The blinding radiance lit up the surrounding city streets against the dark sky as clearly as if it were midafternoon. Connie gaped in shock.

“I think we overdid it...”

“It’s fine. My mother always used to say that whatever you’re doing, too much is always just right.”

“Lady Aliénore sounds like a frightening person.”

An arrow of light whined into the night sky. There must have been a few fireworks mixed in with the firecrackers.

Gradually, a crowd gathered around the bridge, probably drawn by the noise. The roadblocks kept them from getting too close, but each time a flash pierced the sky, cheers rose from the crowd.

The thundering and flashes of light continued, drawing more spectators. Connie had been watching the crowd for a while when she heard a low rumbling sound, separate from the explosions. She looked up in surprise. It was a bell.

“The bell at the clock tower,” Scarlett said.

The heavy sound tore through the still of the night. Connie remembered the day she arrived on El Sol. The bell had rung just like it was ringing now, and hadn’t Marco called it the Bell of Judgment? He said people could tell who had won or lost by the number of times it rang. Once if the plaintiff had won, twice if they had lost... Which meant that if Gregorio’s claim was accepted, it would ring once, and if Lucia was proven right, it would ring twice.

The heavy bass reverberations finally died out, and then it rang again. After that, it was silent.

“...Twice,” Connie whispered before twirling around to face Scarlett.

“The girl won.”

“Yes...!”

Count on Lucia O’Brian. As Connie wondered how she’d done it, she remembered seeing Scarlett give her some advice. Maybe her partner in crime had shared enough of her expertise in bluffing and foul play for Lucia to expose Gregorio Vecchio’s crimes.

“I have no doubt Daeg Gallus is watching this scene from somewhere,”

Scarlett said, looking down on the canal. The explosions flashing in her amethyst eyes were like stars in the night sky.

Scarlett Castiel laughed haughtily.

“I hope you’re disappointed, fellows.”

Even as she spoke, a dazzling comet of light shot up and illuminated the night sky. Glittering sparks swirled like confetti before slowly unraveling into the black of night.



The bonfire in the middle of the fountain plaza licked hungrily toward the heavens. Revelers danced freely around the flames. Unlike a ball, there seemed to be no set etiquette here. Dancers leapt or pranced in time with the lively foreign music. The pairings weren’t limited to men dancing with women; men wrapped their arms around other men’s shoulders as they sang, and women faced each other and tapped their heels.

There were no difficult rules, and everyone enjoyed themselves as they pleased. The only common thread was that they all wore masks. The festival had begun as a celebration of the day when spirits returned to their families, and masks were worn so that the dead would be able to join freely in the festivities. Marco had said before that Carnival was the time when the dead and the living joined hands and danced through the night.

That was why Connie had returned to the mansion to get her mask. Lucia had done the same. The children would normally have been in bed already, but on this night alone, they were allowed to stay up late. The three of them were right next to the bonfire, facing one another as they danced and having a lot of fun, it seemed.

It had been a chaotic day for Connie. Finally freed from nervous tension, she let out a long breath.

“You’re not going to dance?” Scarlett asked.

“By myself...?”

Even if her face was hidden by a mask, she lacked the skill or the courage to

join the circle. She didn't see anyone else dancing alone. As she peered around, though, she noticed another woman looking around curiously. She wore a mask over the upper half of her face and a dress of cotton and hemp that reached her ankles. A wide leather belt cinched the waist of the simple, comfortable-looking frock. Connie watched her for a few minutes, sympathizing with her apparent inexperience, but then she became distracted by the sight of Lucia spinning in circles.

She looked just like a summer fairy with her winged white dress flying out around her. Perhaps sensing Connie's gaze, Lucia turned toward her. When their eyes met, she grinned and said something to Ulysses and Antonio. Then, as always, she ran over to Connie.

"Miss Connie!"

She seemed in high spirits, though her day had been just as eventful as Connie's.

"Have you seen Mr. Randolph yet?" she asked.

Connie shook her head, a distant look in her eyes. According to Marco, he had gone with Basilio to arrest any Daeg Gallus members who were still on the island. *Typical.*

"Oh, I see...", Lucia said, looking disappointed.

"Did you want to talk to him about something?"

Lucia shook her head.

"I so wanted you to see his costume..."

"...His costume?!"

At first, the word didn't register. And when it did, all Connie could do was parrot Lucia idiotically.

"Yes! The Il Rosso costume looked divine on him!"

"I didn't hear anything about that..."

Had Lucia just said Il Rosso? If so, she must mean the costume Connie had seen in the dressing room earlier. She had no clue how he ended up wearing it,

but she promised Lucia she would ask Daniella later if they could borrow it again.

As Connie burned with quiet determination, Lucia stood on tiptoe to whisper in Scarlett's ear. Of course, she wasn't tall enough to reach it, so Scarlett floated down to her with a resigned expression.



“Your plan was a huge success!” Lucia whispered.

“Of course it was. Just who in the world do you think I am?”

Her tone was brusque, but Connie could tell she was pleased.

In the distance, Antonio pointed curiously to a stall selling alcohol, but Marco shook his head. Ulysses watched their exchange with worry, but when he noticed Connie, he smiled shyly and waved.

Connie smiled and waved back. Then she happened to glance in the direction where she had seen the masked woman earlier and caught sight of her dancing happily by herself. Connie blinked in surprise. Unlike Connie, the woman must have had no reservations about dancing in public. Her pale, nearly translucent skin was slightly flushed as she lithely moved her long, slender arms and legs. Each time she jumped, her smooth black hair danced around her, glinting in the firelight.

Connie couldn't see her face or tell how old she was. As Connie stared, feeling she'd seen her somewhere before, the woman turned suddenly in her direction. Their eyes met. In that moment, the eyes behind the mask widened in surprise.



The woman continued to stare at Connie and, after a moment, brought her finger to her finely formed lips. *Shhh*, she whispered, then smiled teasingly.

Connie's eyes went wide.

"Connie? What's wrong? You look even more idiotic than usual," Scarlett said, floating over to Connie where she stood rooted to the ground.

"...Scarlett, do you think that might be her?"

"...Who? I don't see anyone," Scarlett said, puzzled.

"You don't?"

Connie looked back toward the woman, but she was gone. She glanced around. The woman had vanished from the plaza.

Connie was sure she had been there. So beautiful, she took Connie's breath away, with amethyst eyes that sparkled like stars— "What?" Scarlett said.

"...Nothing."

Connie shook her head slowly and held out her hand.

"...What's with the hand?" Scarlett asked.

This was the night when the dead and the living joined hands and danced till dawn.

And so...

Connie grinned broadly at her skeptical partner in crime.

"Let's dance, Scarlett!"



**Constance
Grail**

Seventeen-year-old who has reached the point of making Molotov cocktails. Proved that even a useless person can accomplish things if they put their mind to it, but was honestly shaking because the firecrackers were so much more explosive than she'd expected.



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Sixteen-year-old who is a woman of her word. Be it a boat or anything else, if she says she's gonna burn it, she's gonna burn it.



**Randolph
Ulster**

Twenty-seven-year-old who has been promoted from Grim Reaper to Demon King. Beside himself with worry over his fiancée, who never takes his advice and always rushes headlong into trouble on her own (+ one ghost) as soon as he looks the other way. Theoretically the hero, but has been rather scarce from the start. Finally seized the spotlight by using cosplay, which is technically cheating. ←new!



Lucia O'Brian

Angel with moxie who can fight a demon king with a smile on her face. Does well under pressure, and ad-libbed most of her crucial scene at the courthouse. Partway through the trial, she was practically re-creating a scene from *The Exorcist*. Incidentally, the arms clinging to Gregorio never did disappear.



Antonio Fargo

The demon king is so scary!



Ulysses Faris

Heroine-like seventh prince, who turns out to be more than just a cute face. Bulldozes his way to get what he wants with an inborn cunning and a lack of shame he got straight from his big sister.

Carlo Vecchio

Small-time crook who should have been having the worst day of his life but somehow ended up in decent spirits.

Sena Rilifarco

Who has a name like Sena Rilifarco anyway?

**The Masked Woman
with Black Hair**

A skilled dancer of indeterminate age. Kept giving Connie meaningful looks. Has amethyst eyes that sparkle like stars.



“The gunpowder never got there, you say?”

Adolphus, who was visiting the castle, sounded uncharacteristically befuddled.

“...What happened?”

“It seems the boat that was supposed to arrive never got there...”

Kyle Hughes was similarly at a loss.

Ultimately, the scheme to blow up Saint Mark’s Square never came to fruition, because the Daeg Gallus member who had infiltrated the group of saint worshippers was arrested. The reason for the arrest was rather ridiculous. When the gunpowder the group was counting on didn’t arrive, he scrambled for something to replace it and fell into the net of the Royal Security Force.

“How absurd. I thought he was a member of Daeg Gallus,” Adolphus said.

“Yes, with a tattoo to prove it. At first, we thought it was some kind of trap, but it seems the gunpowder really never arrived. When we interrogated him, he was too upset to do much more than scream and yell. Never told us any of the key details.”

Most likely, the man himself had no idea what had happened.

“Well, I imagine a report will come out eventually...,” Kyle said, seeming unsatisfied with his own explanation.

And so, on this disappointing note, the fuss over the arsons ended. The details would probably never be made public; instead, the crimes would be passed off as the work of a lone wolf and the links to the extremists suppressed. Kimberly Smith would have a talk with the leader of the saint worshippers, and in all likelihood, the extremist group would be broken up before long. It seemed to have been Daeg Gallus that engineered its formation from the start.

There were still too many loose ends to call the matter settled, but for now it

would have to do. The fact that no deaths or injuries had occurred was itself a major achievement.

Having finished his report, Kyle Hughes sighed quietly and picked up the teacup the maid had brought him, intending to moisten his parched throat. He took a sip of the amber-colored liquid—and instantly sprayed it all over.

“Revolting...!”

He was coughing and gagging as if it had gone down his windpipe.

“Duke, what is this?” he managed to ask.

“Ah, that’s lemonade. I made too much by mistake. I tried thinning it with hot water, but it seems it wasn’t to your liking.”

“Like I said, it’s not a question of personal taste!”

Kyle’s eyes were watering. Adolphus recalled that when Maximilian tasted the concoction, his face gradually turned white and he started to shake, but he’d chalked that up to his son’s poor constitution. A summer cold or the like.

Adolphus smiled wryly. In the end, *she* was the only one who’d ever enjoyed his lemonade.

As he looked down at the porcelain cup, an old memory came back to him.



Aliénore was lying in bed. She took a sip of freshly made lemonade and burst out laughing.

“W-why does it taste like this...?!” she exclaimed. “You have a kind of gift, I think!”

“I have a feeling that wasn’t a compliment, but for future reference, may I ask what it tastes like?”

“The closest thing I can think of is mud from the bottom of the Canal Grande.”

“...I think I’ll stop using the herbs.”

Aliénore always talked nostalgically about how the lemonade in her hometown was made with herbs, and he’d gotten the idea in his head to reproduce it. Sage, thyme, rosemary—he had made a decoction of all the herbs

he could think of, but apparently it wasn't right.

Aliénore wiped the tears from the corners of her eyes and giggled.

"Adolphus, do you remember what I told you about Carnival?"

He was unable to reply for a moment, then smiled as if it were nothing.

"...The festival on the island where you were born, you mean?"

How could he not remember? It was the festival to celebrate the return of the dead.

"Yes. I always wondered why everyone wore masks to the festival. After all, with masks on, you can't tell who anyone is."

Can't you? Adolphus thought that he would be able to recognize Aliénore no matter what she was wearing. But he didn't think that was the answer she was looking for, so he kept the thought to himself.

"But it doesn't matter," she went on.

"What do you mean?"

"It doesn't matter if you're able to meet a dead person or not. That festival is for the people left behind."

She smiled a little sadly.

"It's meant to soothe those mourning the dead. That's why they have the masks. Imagine the shock if you were expecting to meet a certain spirit, but then you didn't. That's why everyone has a mask on. The point is to make people think their loved one might be behind one of the masks."

She snorted and jerked her face away.

"How absurd. It makes me so angry; I'd never join their dance. I'd give them a reproachful look and ruin their fun."

She was talking as if she were already dead. As if she knew her time in this world was almost over...

Adolphus never knew how to react when she got like this. He was as bewildered as a lost child.

“You’re going to the festival, then?”

That was why he always acted like it didn’t bother him. His heart pounded uncomfortably in his ears, but that didn’t matter. He knew it was what she wanted.

“In that case, I’ll stay here and think of you.”

“Even if I’m not around?” she pouted. Adolphus nodded.

“After all, isn’t Carnival a day for the living?”

Aliénore, who had said as much herself, wore a lonely smile.

“If that’s so, then I’m not going,” he said, meeting her jewel-like eyes. Aliénore was a persevering woman who rarely complained, but sometimes he wanted her to understand that it was all right to do things another way.

“I’ll stay here and think only of you.”

He would make a day just for her, not on the island where she grew up, but here. He would make a place where his complicated wife could laugh freely.

“...Is there any point in that?”

“I make a point of not doing pointless things.”

“.....Sometimes you are a hopeless fool.”

Although her tone was exasperated, she smiled bashfully. He would be a fool all the time if it meant he got to see her smile like that.

“All right, then, while I’m back on my island, what do you plan to do?” she asked.

“Let’s see... I think I’ll get myself some out-of-season lemons and try perfecting my recipe for lemonade with herbs. And I’ll think of you dancing in a far-off land.”

Aliénore smiled as if she thought this was the funniest thing in the world.



Kyle Hughes was gone. Adolphus brought the lukewarm cup to his lips. He took a sip, then blinked.

Ah, I see his point, he thought.

Unable to fully suppress the laughter that bubbled up within him, Adolphus's shoulders shook.

"It *is* revolting."



Adolphus Castiel

Has been trying to reproduce his deceased wife's favorite lemonade, but recently realized he's hardly ever drunk the stuff. ←new!



Kyle Hughes

Twenty-six-year-old who almost made it the whole way across the River Styx, thanks to a sip of lemonade. Will probably suffer from lemonphobia for the foreseeable future. Staying overnight at work a lot these days, thanks to some blasted extremists, and had to put his search for a wife on hold. ←new!



Aliénore Castiel

The original Scarlett; appears naive but in truth is outrageously obstinate and contrary. Hated that stupid custom of the masked ball, but thanks to a certain someone's idiotic comment, she stopped caring. Figures if Adolphus is going to make lemonade and wait for her return, she might as well go to the ball at least once. Incidentally, though she said that infamous yellow liquid tasted like "mud from the Canal Grande," she still drank it down with a smile.

Daeg Gallus Members Hiding Out in Adelbide

Have no idea why their scheme failed or why they got arrested. To be totally honest, they still don't have a clue as to what happened. Possibly the biggest victims in the whole story.

The masked ball continued late into the night, and by the time the last logs burned out and the group returned home, everyone was exhausted. The children were rocked to dreamland in the gondola and carried into the mansion by Marco and Connie, which made for a nice memory.

The next day, Connie slept in. As she finally yawned her way downstairs, she bumped into Randolph, who was just returning.

“Ah, Constance. Do you have a moment to talk?” he asked.

“Of course, but don’t you need to rest? You just got back, didn’t you?”

“One all-nighter is nothing for me.”

“Are you serious?”

Connie couldn’t help staring. But just as he said, she found no traces of exhaustion on his face, and so she followed him into the drawing room. Once they were seated on the sofa, Randolph began explaining the events of the previous night.

After Gregorio’s trial ended, Randolph left Lucia and the others to meet up with Basilio. Together with a team of investigators from the Security Commission, they began searching for several members of Daeg Gallus. By dawn, they had arrested them all.

However, they made the mistake of momentarily taking their eyes off the prisoners while transporting them, and the men seized the opportunity to commit suicide.

“We thought we’d checked them thoroughly, but they were hiding poison in their back teeth, it seems.”

His voice revealed a shade of regret.

Gregorio Vecchio had been sent under guard to a prison on the mainland, but according to Randolph, he wasn’t likely to yield much useful information.

“My guess is that Daeg Gallus saw he was struggling financially and used him.”

Although Gregorio had stooped to fraud and blackmail before, this was the first time he had worked with Daeg Gallus. As for his son, Carlo, he appeared to be genuinely ignorant of the whole affair. It was still unclear how the House of Vecchio would be handled, but according to Basilio, it probably wouldn't be wiped out entirely. Instead, Basilio would take on the role of overseer. Given what a lousy, warped character Carlo was, it wouldn't be an easy job.

“By the way, Constance,” Randolph said when he had finished his story. His eyes narrowed as he gazed at her. “Do you have anything to say to me?”

“What do you mean?” she asked. Was she supposed to tell him something? She couldn't think of anything. The crease between Randolph's brows deepened.

“...I hear you went on something of a rampage yesterday,” he said.

“Oh...!” Connie slapped her hands over her mouth. He could only be talking about the incident at Mezzaluna Pier. In part because the Muro di Luche had been canceled, the impromptu show had caused quite a stir. But what did that have to do with Randolph? She glanced at him. His icy stare bore into her.

He was mad.

Connie was astonished. He looked genuinely angry. Still scowling like a demon, he said in that familiar, low voice of his, “How many times do I have to tell you? Before you go and do something like that, you have to let me know.”

“U-um, but, you see... How should I put this?”

“If you have an excuse, I'm ready to listen.”

“I forgot.”

She was so overawed that she accidentally blurted out the truth. She was universally known to be useless when it came to that sort of thing. If something was happening in front of her, it took up her entire brain and everything else fell out the bottom. She only realized her gaffe when she heard Randolph's extremely long sigh. It hinted at suppressed anger.

“R-Randolph, I—”

He shot her a piercing glare and she yelped. Then, a moment later, the biggest thunderbolt of the summer descended upon her.

Incidentally, Antonio happened to witness the scene and, legs trembling and tears in his eyes, muttered, “I never imagined there were scarier things in the world than Il Rosso...” ...Though he wasn’t about to admit that to anyone else.

When Randolph’s seemingly endless lecture finally came to a close, Connie stumbled into the dining room. Breakfast was long over. As she buried her head in her arms at the dining table, someone said kindly, “If you’re tired, how about a meringue cookie?”

“Lady Daniella!”

Her dark brown hair was pulled into a messy bun, and she wore an apron over her dress. In her hands was a plate of cookies that looked like little stars. Connie glanced back and forth between Daniella’s face and the cookies before asking in surprise, “Did you make those yourself?”

Daniella smiled shyly. “I hope you like them. Actually, I like baking almost as much as history. A little something sweet should wake you right up.”

She set the china plate down softly on the table. The glistening cookies were swirled like they’d been made with a pastry bag.

The other day at the coffeehouse, Daniella had pestered her friend Natalia for her secret family recipe, and the previous morning, Connie had heard she was going to get it. Judging from the neat rows of cookies, she seemed to have succeeded.

Connie popped one into her mouth. It was crunchy and light, with a gentle sweetness that melted on her tongue.

“...It’s delicious.”

The mellow sweetness and texture like melting snow proved addictive, and she couldn’t help reaching for more. As Daniella watched her toss cookies into her mouth, she said happily, “I’m glad you like them,” and turned to leave. Connie stopped eating and called after her.

“Wait, Lady Daniella...!”

“Yes?” she answered, turning around. Connie stood from her chair and bowed her head.

“I just wanted to thank you for everything. For these cookies, but also, I heard from Randolph that your advice was very important during the trial yesterday.”

Daniella looked puzzled.

“I hardly did anything, but I’m happy if I was able to help. Sometimes rumors turn out to be useful,” she joked.

Connie put on a serious face as she asked her next question.

“Did you hear this rumor at Lady’s Holiday?”

“Yes, I overheard it by chance.”

By chance.

Daniella’s gossip club included members of various classes and occupations. That probably made for a wealth of gossip. But could gossip really have given her the name of someone guilty of embezzlement? Connie slowly turned her gaze toward Daniella.

“Lady Daniella?”

“Yes?”

“Was that written in the secret recipe, too?”

Silence descended between them. Daniella’s expression didn’t change as she returned Connie’s gaze. Then, after a moment, she broke into a smile.

“Wouldn’t you agree it was well worth the trouble?”

Connie had been expecting this answer, but the shock of actually hearing it still brought on a wave of dizziness that nearly made her sit back down.

“...Um, then, who is Natalia’s grandmother?”

“A man Gregorio trained from a young age, a gambler and an alcoholic.”

“That’s a far cry from a grandmother...!”

“You never know who’s listening.”

Daniella smiled brightly. Then, as casually as a friend explaining what she’d

been up to lately, she began talking.

“I happened to hear that he had run up quite a debt at an illegal gambling den, so we tried to buy the info off him with alcohol.”

Daniella shrugged and added, “It took a while.”

“Lady Daniella, are you by chance—” Connie began. The rest was a hunch. “With Il Rosso?”

The idea had struck her while she was talking to Randolph in the drawing room. When she asked how he’d cornered Gregorio, he mentioned Roberto Forte. Forte was a longtime member of the Chamber of Commerce, it seemed, and had conspired with Gregorio to embezzle festival funds. Randolph said he learned about it from none other than Daniella.

Scarlett had been the first to say it was odd. One time might be coincidence, but more suggested something else.

When Connie thought about it, she realized Daniella had also been the one who told them the merchant ship was loaded with firecrackers. That time, too, she’d said it was a coincidence.

But in response to Connie’s question, Daniella shook her head.

“Haven’t you heard, Constance? Il Rosso was disbanded.”

“But then why...?”

Why was Daniella engaged in what seemed like intelligence work? Connie couldn’t understand what her goal was. Who was this woman who called herself Daniella?

“What’s the point of an intelligence officer the whole country recognizes?”

“Ah...,” Connie said vaguely. That sort of work *would* be difficult if you got too famous, she supposed.

“I’m more like a personnel investigator,” she said.

“Personnel...?” Connie echoed, bewildered by this unfamiliar title.

“Yes. When an organization hires a new employee, they look into the individual’s background and reputation with their former employer. In simple

terms, that's my job."

Connie had a general grasp of what she was saying. Apparently, Daniella had been hired by someone to look into Gregorio and his associates. The question was, who hired her? When Connie asked her, the older woman answered with utter nonchalance.

"The Republic."

"The Republic," Connie echoed.

"Yes. My father had the job before me, but he hurt his back and couldn't continue. I was appointed to replace him."

"Personnel investigations for the Republic...?" Connie repeated slowly.

"Yes. It's a straightforward job. I simply look into people whose conduct appears to threaten the Republic."

"Is that really what you do?!"

Wasn't that essentially the same as the secret police? Connie's cheek twitched.

"I believe so," Daniella answered, looking puzzled.

"And just to be clear, if you're working for the Republic, then your employer is —"

"I suppose my immediate superior is the sovereign," she answered, as casual as ever. Connie felt even dizzier than before.

An intelligence officer hired by the sovereign. In other words—

"Sounds like she's Il Rosso after all," Scarlett said, raising her eyebrows in exasperation.

True, the position was now called something much less dramatic, but the job description was nearly identical.

"Then what about Lady's Holiday...?"

Considering the nature of Natalia's recipe, it could hardly be your average gossip club. Connie gasped as a possibility occurred to her.

“Y-you’re not all Il Rosso, are you...?!” she shrieked, turning white. Daniella stared at her in surprise.

“Oh, no, it’s just a gossip club.”

“Th-that’s a relief.”

But no sooner had Connie exhaled than Daniella added, “On the surface, that is.” Connie froze.

“W-what do you mean?”

“The club was originally founded by Cornelia Faris as an intelligence agency.”

“Cornelia again...!”

Connie covered her face with her hands. Most of the trouble on this island seemed to originate with Cornelia. Connie was starting to develop a phobia of that woman.

“...If memory serves,” Scarlett began, “Sena Rilifarco founded the club for women who had too much time on their hands. But that’s just the cover story. The truth is, the club’s members gathered the information needed by Il Rosso.”

Scarlett smiled wryly.

“Though not all the members are investigators,” Daniella went on. “Which reminds me, I believe you have a similar organization in Adelbide.”

“We do?”

“It’s called the Violet Association. I hear the two groups interacted once, decades ago, before I was a member of Lady’s Holiday.”

Connie suddenly thought of Kimberly Smith, dressed from head to toe in pink.

“...Wait a second. Then Lady Berta—”

Wasn’t Berta Neuen the president of Lady’s Holiday?

“Would you like to know?”

“No, never mind.”

Connie shook her head, not wanting to know any more than she already did. She pretended not to hear the ghostly voice that said, “I can pretty much guess

the rest.”

“But is it all right that you’ve told me as much as you have?” Connie asked nervously. Was she perhaps going to be “accidentally” disappeared after this conversation?

Daniella nodded, smiling.

“I’m just a personnel investigator. Basilio knows that, too.”

“He d-does?”

That was slightly reassuring.

“Also,” Daniella added, “I think I said as much before, but...”

She paused and turned to Connie with a broad smile.

“We’d be happy to welcome you into our club whenever you like.”

Connie’s face tensed.

“...You’re joking, right?”

“That’s for you to decide.”

Daniella smiled, but Connie couldn’t tell if it was playful or serious.

“Well, I’d better be going,” Daniella said, turning to leave. As she rested her hand on the door, she turned briefly, as if she’d just remembered something, and added, “Have a *good holiday*.”

For a while after the other woman had left, Connie sat at the table in a daze. Presently, Randolph walked in, dressed in lighter clothes. Guessing something had happened, he asked Connie, “What’s wrong?”

“L-Lady Daniella...”

“The Duchess of Fargo, you mean?”

“She’s actually like Il Rosso, but not Il Rosso...and...”

“You’re babbling,” Scarlett pointed out, exasperated. But Randolph seemed to understand.

He nodded, his expression blank as usual. “Yes, I know.”

Connie was shocked.

“You knew...?!” she asked, stepping toward him. He withdrew slightly, looking embarrassed.

“Yes. I mean, no, I didn’t know the details, but Lady Smith once told me that there was a secret intelligence organization in Soldita, so...”

Apparently, he had guessed from the freight incident and the information about Gregorio’s crimes that Daniella might belong to that organization.

“...Constance?”

She snapped out of her daze.

“Why didn’t you tell me?!” she said accusingly.

“You didn’t ask.”

“That’s the problem with you...!”

Randolph gave her a puzzled look. She was about to tear into him furiously when a maid entered with a wagon bearing a light meal.

“Before I came in, I asked the kitchen to prepare a snack. Would you like to share it with me?” he asked.

Connie glanced at the wagon and caught sight of a sandwich—ham and cheese between thin slices of toast. Her stomach grumbled at the sight of the melty, glistening cheese.

“...Didn’t you just have cookies?” Scarlett asked, sounding fed up. But Connie was of the opinion that dessert didn’t count.

Forgetting how angry she was, Connie eagerly sat back down in her chair. The maid was serving up two portions of everything. Randolph must have figured she was hungry and ordered enough for the both of them. The maid set out cutlery on the white tablecloth and gracefully arranged the meal. Connie blinked as a cup of steaming coffee piled with fresh cream was set before her. It was just how she liked it. Randolph’s was black, so hers must have been a special request.

Connie smiled and picked up her cup. The liquid inside was sweet and light

and just a little bitter. As she turned happily to Randolph, she noticed that his plate was already empty. Her smile faded.

“You’re already done eating?!”

“Yes. I picked up the habit of finishing my meals quickly at work.”

“Don’t you think you should slow down on your days off, at least...?”

“I have an errand to run after this.”

“An errand?”

It seemed he had to report the events of the previous night to the justice of the peace.

“The Security Commission has an office on Mille Street. Lord Basilio has been summoned as well.”

“The Security Commission...?”

“Soldita’s police agency.”

He explained that it was like the Royal Security Force in Adelbide, with the power to investigate and fight crime.

“Are you going soon?”

“No, the Security Commission is sending a gondola to pick us up.”

“I see.”

“And besides, Lord Basilio hasn’t come back yet.”

No sooner had he said these words than Basilio walked in.

“Lieutenant Commander Ulster, the gondola should be here soon...”

His gaze fell on Connie, whose cheeks were bulging like a squirrel’s with a bite of sandwich. He seemed surprised.

“Miss Grail?”

“Good morning, Duke Fargo,” she said, delivering this ladylike greeting after hurriedly gulping down the food in her mouth.

“Considering the time, I’m not sure whether to say good morning or good

afternoon. But in any case, I'm glad you're here."

A cool smile spread over his handsome face.

"A forgotten item of yours was delivered. Would you mind taking a look at it when you're done?"

"A forgotten item?"

"Yes. What do you think it is?" he said, smiling meaningfully. Connie traced her memories of the previous day. She recalled dumping her purse out on Mezzaluna Pier to find something flammable. Something might have gone missing then. If it was delivered to the mansion, it must be something immediately recognizable as hers.

"Could it be the biscotti I brought along in case I got hungry? I did write my name on the paper it was wrapped in so no one else would eat it."

"Of course not. Are you truly an idiot, Connie?" Scarlett asked.

Basilio, apparently thinking she was joking, gave a short laugh.

"It's a rowboat. Where in the world did you get such a thing?"

Connie tilted her head, then gasped.

"Ah...!"

She had completely forgotten about the boat Berta Neuen had lent her to escape.

"The young man who returned it said it was tied to a post near Wilda Street. Seems the knot was poor, and the rope had come partly undone. He thought it would be dangerous to leave it as it was, so he brought it here. I think he was from the Chamber of Commerce. Said he saw you rowing furiously down the canal yesterday. He remembered you because you'd been on the vaporette to the shrine with him and you chatted a bit."

Randolph leaned over and whispered into her ear, "Where'd you get a boat?"

"It belongs to the shrine. Lady Berta lent it to me when Gregorio's henchmen were chasing...me..."

As she spoke, the blood drained from her face.

“Constance?”

“Oh, nothing. I was just thinking I’d better return it as soon as possible if I don’t want to pay some kind of late fee...”

But even as she spoke, she realized the fee was likely nonnegotiable. This was Berta the miser they were talking about. She seemed hellbent on squeezing every last coin from Connie’s purse.

“But if I show up without warning, I’ll probably be turned away...”

She was at her wit’s end. The problem was those cold-blooded gate guards. They just refused to listen. Even when a poor, weak maiden begged them to rescue her, they didn’t bat an eyelash. They probably didn’t even have hearts. And they were carrying those deadly-looking spears. How in the world was an ordinary unarmed civilian supposed to reason with them?

As she was pondering this, Randolph walked over to ask Basilio something. After exchanging a few words, Basilio smiled cheerfully and left the dining room. Randolph returned to Connie’s side.

“Constance, I have good news.”

“You do?”

“We’ve received permission to visit the shrine. Someone is supposed to deliver the pass today.”

“Oh!” Connie exclaimed. Basilio must have succeeded in expediting the application, as promised.

Randolph said he’d asked Basilio to send a vaporette to transport the rowboat, as well.

“It should be here in a few hours. He said you can ride on the vaporette, so you can go with the boat to the shrine.”

“I feel bad for asking so many favors of Basilio... Are you sure it’s all right?”

“How else will you return the boat?”

“I thought I’d row it back,” she said quite seriously.

“You what?”

Randolph looked at her as if he had just discovered a small, pitiful animal. Without saying a word, he placed his hand on her head. *Incomprehensible.*

Just then, Basilio returned to give Connie the pass for the shrine.

“Tell Lady Berta hello for me,” he said with another meaningful smile. “And tell her thank you for looking after Daniella.”

Soon after, the Security Commission gondola came for the two men. Connie waved good-bye to them before returning to her room to get ready.

A few hours later, she was once again walking into Fanoom Shrine. She passed by the gate guards without issue, and when she reached the top of the stairs, panting, the beautiful, ageless priestess was waiting for her with arms crossed and a grumpy expression.

“Oh!” Connie yelped. Was it her imagination or did Berta look mad?

She must not have been imagining it, because the woman immediately thrust her hand out. Connie had barely left the boat!

“Your entrance fee?” she demanded in place of a greeting. “And the late fee for the boat.” *As miserly as usual.*

Connie was prepared this time. From the bag slung over her shoulder, she withdrew a small glass jar and set it gently in Berta’s palm.

“...What is this?” she asked.

The blue glass was etched with intricate, elegant designs. It had clearly been made to order by a master of the craft.

“The most valuable thing I have,” Connie answered.

It was the bottle Adolphus had given her before she left for El Sol. Inside the beautiful glass were Aliénore’s ashes.

Berta stared suspiciously at the bottle in her palm before her eyes suddenly widened in realization. She scowled as if she’d just swallowed a bug.

“...For someone who looks so meek, you’re awfully cheeky.”

“I hear that a lot,” Connie answered with a smile. Berta looked caught off guard. “By the way, I’m not accepting returns.”

“...I see. I suppose I’ll throw away the contents and sell the bottle, then.”

“I know you wouldn’t do something like that.”

Berta frowned.

“How do you know?”

“After all, you hate sage, don’t you?”

“Sage?”

Connie nodded. She’d heard about it at the coffeehouse. If she remembered right, it was a woman named Anette who had told her. Judging by the way she talked, she was an old friend of Berta’s.

Lady Berta detests sage. If she so much as sees those silver-green leaves by the side of the road, she makes a detour to avoid them.

She also said Berta disliked the shrine’s special lemonade, which was made with sage.

Berta seemed confused by this abrupt comment.

“True, I detest it, but what’s your point?”

“I was thinking about why you grow an herb if you hate it so much.”

The road leading to the shrine was lined with pale purple blossoms that waved in the breeze. The stems, which reached to Connie’s waist, were lined with the tubular flowers. It was a patch of sage.

Berta blinked in confusion.

“...I’m not the only person who lives at the shrine. Sage is quite useful. It prevents meat and fish from spoiling, and it helps remove foul odors.”

“And it soothes sore throats and calms anxiety.”

“...What’s your point?”

“I heard the lemonade at the coffeehouse is based on a closely guarded shrine recipe. You invented that recipe for Aliénore, didn’t you?”

Berta was silent, her brows drawn together. Sage wasn’t the only herb in the lemonade. Thyme, marjoram, and chamomile were mixed in, too. All were

remedies for ill health. Aliénore had been sickly from birth. Connie guessed that she had needed medicine to get through the day. But young children have sensitive palates and often refuse to drink decoctions of medicinal herbs. Connie figured Berta had turned the decoction into lemonade to make it easier for Aliénore to drink.

“A person who did something like that would never throw away Aliénore’s ashes.”

Most important, Berta’s lemonade was delicious. The strong flavor of the herbs was balanced by the lemon’s acidity so that it became a pleasant accent, and the sweet honey tied everything together. It really was a perfect recipe. Berta must have worked long and hard to get it right. And she had done it all for one person.

“What a silly girl you are,” the priestess scoffed.

“I hear that a lot, too,” Connie said, smiling. Then, turning serious, she said, “May I ask you a question?”

Berta nodded almost imperceptibly.

“Do you know about Cornelia Faris’s starry crown?”

Berta shook her head slowly.

“Of course not,” she answered flatly. “Though I know the words themselves almost certainly refer to Cornelia’s bloodline.”

Connie, too, knew that the phrase originally referred to the legitimate successor to the imperial throne—someone who carried the blood of the tribal chiefs and royal families Faris had conquered, as numerous as the stars in the sky.

“But that’s not what you mean, is it?” Berta asked.

According to Scarlett, Aliénore had used the term to refer to something other than its original meaning.

“When we asked you about the starry crown before, Lady Berta, you said it was a curse. Why?”

She had said it the first time Connie visited Fanoom Shrine, with Randolph.

Did that mean she knew something?

Berta shrugged.

“No reason, really. I simply think that whatever it refers to, bloodlines or otherwise, it can’t be anything good.”



“What do you mean...?”

“Cornelia Faris made this shrine into a sanctuary, but she also inflicted harm. Her descendants were placed under the direct supervision of the Republic. Some people call it guardianship, and that may even have been her intention. But when unforeseen events occur, her descendants are taken here without their consent and locked away in the name of protecting the starry crown. It’s like a giant birdcage. Once inside, they are no longer allowed to stretch their wings. What is that if not a curse?”

“Are you talking about Aliénore?”

After she’d lost the protection of her parents, she was placed in the shrine’s care to prevent someone from using her in a power struggle. The young girl had no say in the matter.

“She hated the shrine,” Berta said flatly. Connie blinked and tilted her head.

“Did she?”

“You wouldn’t understand.”

Her tone was a little harsh, but Connie ignored that and said cheerfully, “But do you know what Aliénore once said to her young daughter, Scarlett Castiel?”



“Aliénore...?” Berta murmured in shock.

“Yes. She said, ‘If you want to lay hold of the world, search for Cornelia’s starry crown.’”

It was just like the first line of a thrilling adventure story.

“If Aliénore really hated this place, I doubt she would have sent her daughter searching for it.”

To the contrary, she would have tried to keep her away.

“Also, I don’t think Cornelia Faris intended to create a birdcage.”

“...What do you mean?”

“It’s true that, in the beginning, she probably built the shrine to protect her family—those who carried the blood of the starry crown. But over time, I think she came to want to protect all kinds of people.”

“All kinds of people...?”

“Yes. Just like you protected me yesterday.”

Berta looked slightly shocked.

“How could you know something like that?”

“Just look at the name of the coffeehouse, and the travelogue by Sena Rilifarco. They’re both saying the same thing. They’re signposts for *lost people*. Nowhere does it say they’re only for Cornelia’s descendants.

“I know someone a little like Cornelia,” Connie added.

Cornelia Faris was a symbol of misfortune. The blood running in her veins could start a war at any moment. The same was true for her children and their children. Strictly speaking, she should have lived a solitary life and let her bloodline come to an end.

But...

Connie glanced behind her. There was her partner in crime, haughtier, more confident, and more beautiful than anyone in the world. If Scarlett Castiel had been in Cornelia’s shoes, she surely would have said, “And what of it?” No one

could be sure, but Connie thought Cornelia was probably the same. That was why, as Sylvia Latué, she devoted herself so thoroughly to charitable work that people called her a saint, and why she contributed to economic advancement as Sena Rilifarco, and why she rounded up anyone who dared harm the Republic as a member of Il Rosso.

She devoted herself body and soul to the Republic.

Connie could think of only one wish that would have motivated her to do so much. A wish not only for her generation, but for all that followed.

If you have a complaint, bring it on.

Wasn't this shrine's existence proof of that?

Of course, Connie had concocted this whole theory herself, but she had a hunch it wasn't too far off target. After all—

She looked again at Scarlett, who snorted and turned away.

“That's why I don't think the starry crown is a curse,” she went on.

She paused, looked straight ahead, and smiled brightly.

“I think it's a blessing.”

Berta stared in surprise, then slightly—ever so slightly—she narrowed her eyes, as if looking into the sun.

“...You really are cheeky.”

She sighed theatrically.

“How about a cup of tea before you go?” she asked, just like she had on Connie's previous visit.

Berta's garden was very *natural*, to put it nicely. In truth, it was practically indistinguishable from a forest. A table with a tile mosaic top and some chairs with metal legs stood amid the wild profusion of plants. Berta sat Connie down in one of the chairs and made a pot of herb tea. It smelled like freshly picked peppermint. Connie could see herself getting addicted to the fresh, pale green drink with its bracing aroma.

“To tell you the truth, I had no desire whatsoever to save you yesterday,”

Berta announced calmly. Connie froze, teacup in midair.

“Huh?”

“But Daniella seemed to like you, and...there were Cornelia’s final words to consider.”

“Cornelia Faris again,” Connie and Scarlett said in unison.

“Yes. She said that if a Grail ever showed up here, we should shake them down for as much money as we could.”

“You mean you were targeting my family specifically?!”

Connie couldn’t believe Berta had just mentioned the Grails.

“Sounds like Cornelia couldn’t stand your ancestors,” Scarlett said, astonished.

Connie couldn’t exactly argue with her, so she just groaned. Then something occurred to her.

“...She didn’t say to *chase us away*?”

Shake them down... Didn’t that mean she was allowing them to enter the shrine? And taking it a step further, perhaps it was even an instruction to protect the Grails. Of course, Cornelia’s personality was difficult to understand and incredibly twisted, but...

Instead of answering, Berta shrugged.

“Excuse me for a moment,” she said, standing and walking off.

A few minutes later, she returned holding a book. It was bound in leather with gold leaf on the spine, and it looked quite old. The cover was peeling away in places.

“Is that a book?” Connie asked.

“It’s Sena Rilifarco’s diary.”

“Diary?”

Connie stared at the ancient volume. The pages were yellowing and looked as if they might fall out if she wasn’t careful.

Sena Rilifarco. In other words, this was Cornelia Faris's diary.

"Well, to be honest, it's less a diary than a coded message in the form of a diary."

"A coded message."

"I have a copy in the library, so if you'd like to read it, I'll lend it to you."

"I—I am curious, but I'm not sure I can finish it by the time I leave..."

"I didn't expect you to," Berta said with a snort.

Connie looked at her curiously. Did she mean it was all right for Connie to take the book back to Adelbide? Before she got too excited, she wondered what the lending fee would be. She only had copper coins with her today.

"Um, h-how much will it cost...?" she asked fearfully, but Berta just shrugged.

"It's free."

"What?!" Connie blurted out, caught off guard by this generous response. Berta raised her eyebrows in irritation.

"Oh, stop it. Consider this your change."

"My what?" Connie said, her mouth falling open. When she realized how she must look, she slapped her hand over her mouth. "You mean change for Aliénore's—"

"That *glass jar* must have been a lot of trouble to bring with you," Berta interrupted. She was still insisting it was all about the value of the jar.

After that, Berta said she had something to do and told Connie to show herself out when she'd finished her tea. As she was leaving, she turned back.

"Oh, I almost forgot," she said. "If you have time, pay your respects at Sena Rilifarco's grave before you leave."

Late afternoon sun bathed the garden in peaceful light. Connie took a breath and reached for the old diary. The handwriting was smeared in places, but it was in a beautiful, flowing hand. Unfortunately, since it was written in Solditan, Connie didn't understand it very well. It wasn't that she couldn't read it, but she needed a dictionary.

As she scanned the words she knew, Scarlett peered over her shoulder with great interest. For a while, Connie flipped through the pages. Cornelia must have been rather careless, because although it was a diary, the dates were mixed up. Connie couldn't read most of the words, but now and then she made out the name Percival. It wasn't a terribly unusual name, but she wondered if it might refer to Percival Grail.

"...I wonder if Cornelia Faris was friends with my ancestor," Connie muttered.

"Friends?" Scarlett asked.

"Yes. Look, she's written the name Percival here and there. She allowed him into the shrine one way or another, and she gave him her travelogue. Do you think maybe it was because she wanted him to know how wonderful the place she lived was—"

"Seems to me their relationship was a total disaster."

"Huh?"

"You're right that she mentions Percival Grail's name, but most of the time, it's to hurl abuse at him."

"...Huh?"

Connie stared down at the journal. It was hard to imagine the refined handwriting spelling out curses and insults. What in the world could their relationship have been like? She wanted to know more, but at the same time, she didn't. It was hard to explain. She shut the journal firmly. The vaporette would be coming back to get her soon. As she walked down the forest path, she thought about the momentous secret hidden there. Cornelia Faris had devoted her life to that secret.

"I'm sure Lady Aliénore wanted you to know about this shrine. Right, Scarlett?"

"The cage, you mean?" Scarlett retorted sarcastically.

"Come on, you know that's not what it was. This is a place to return to. She got her freedom. Experiencing freedom—that's what she meant by laying hold of the world, I think."

To Connie, it seemed that Cornelia's starry crown was the shrine itself—and the sanctuary she created.

The leaves on the trees shone in the summer sun, casting dappled shadows on the ground. Connie walked through the trembling pattern of shadow and light until she reached Sena Rilifarco's grave. Scarlett glanced casually at the letters engraved on the stone marker and clicked her tongue.

"Connie, we've been had," she said.

"Huh?"

"I thought it was strange that she told us to pay our respects at the grave. Totally out of character for that woman."

"...Lady Berta, you mean?"

"Who else could I mean? Look, Constance. See the year of Sena Rilifarco's death on that gravestone?"

Scarlett narrowed her eyes in annoyance.

"According to that diary, she was still alive then."

"...Huhhh?"

"I just read it a few minutes ago. I'm sure the entry for that day read, 'I'll take the secret of August with me to my grave.'"

"...By 'grave,' she means here, right?"

Scarlett looked like she was ready to bite Connie's head off.

"You honestly think she'd do something so straightforward? To start with, this isn't a grave. There aren't any remains here. It's probably a message for those who read her diary. 'August' and 'secret' must be code words."

Connie's stomach churned. She had a bad feeling about this.

"Cornelia Faris was a member of Il Rosso," Scarlett said. "It wouldn't surprise me if she had information that could turn the world upside down."

Scarlett was right. Cornelia had survived upheaval in the empire, and after fleeing to Soldita, she was constantly active behind the scenes. She must have been a formidable woman.

“B-but that was hundreds of years ago, wasn’t it? It probably wouldn’t mean much today, right? Like, this person backstabbed that person, or this person did something bad, or—”

“Who knows?” Scarlett interrupted. “Maybe it’s a recipe for a horrible poison that makes the victim’s entire body run with blood. Maybe it’s instructions for a bomb that would blow away this whole city. With something like that, you could control the world. Just like my mother said.”

Connie’s face tensed visibly.

“The question is, where is it? I have a feeling there’s a clue in that diary...,” Scarlett said. The amused glint in her amethyst eyes suggested she was joking, but Connie was too upset to notice.

“You would never search for something so d-d-d-d-dangerous, would you?!”

She looked up at Scarlett, her eyes pleading. The legendary villain smiled brilliantly.

“Who knows?”

“Scarlett...!”



The kitchen at the end of the hall was deserted. Before long, it would probably be bustling with the chatter and activity of cooks preparing dinner. On the counter was a basket of freshly picked vegetables. The cabinet behind was lined with jars of food, and dried meat and bundles of herbs hung from the walls.

Berta chose one of the jars from the shelf, set it on the counter, and opened the lid. Inside were lemons preserved in honey. She picked up several slices with a pair of wooden tongs and dropped them into a pitcher of cold water freshly drawn from the well. Next, she found a fresh lemon in the basket. She sliced it in half and squeezed out the juice by hand. The instant the fresh scent reached her nose, a young girl’s voice welled up from deep in her memory.

Berta!

The girl in her memory was always smiling brilliantly.

Berta, look! I fell!

The girl never addressed her respectfully, no matter how many times Berta scolded her. And the moment Berta looked away, she'd vanish. She was nothing but trouble. Berta had been raised through her teens as a completely ordinary noble girl and never learned to fix up bloody knees or anything like that. She remembered being utterly at a loss when Aliénore first arrived.

That's why I'm always telling you not to run!

I wasn't running today! I fell from a tree!

It was around that time that Berta also learned what it meant to be struck speechless.

From the day Aliénore Shibola came into her life, she was a friendly, endlessly cheerful child. Her parents had died when she was still at the age that children need the most affection, and Berta was sure she must be lonely. But she rarely revealed any sign of it. Every day, it seemed, she fell and hurt herself, but she never once cried. Berta had assumed that she must have a naturally high tolerance for pain.

The first time she got a fever was about a month after she'd arrived at the shrine. She hadn't said a word about it, so Berta didn't even know she had one until she collapsed. That was when Berta realized that the girl simply didn't say what she was feeling.

The doctor who examined her said she didn't have long to live. She had been born with a weak heart. Berta was incredulous. When she told the doctor that the child often ran and climbed trees, he was shocked. He said he couldn't guarantee she would survive her next major attack.

As Berta gazed down at Aliénore sleeping in the grips of fever, she heard her moan "Mother..." between labored breaths. Tears were streaming from her eyes.

Ah, Berta thought. Now I understand.

It wasn't that she felt no sorrow over the death of her parents, or no pain over the blood she shed. She wasn't strong—she was simply persevering.

In that moment, Berta felt profound pity for the girl. She should never have come to the shrine. Yes, the shrine was safe. But it was also lonely. This girl who didn't know how to complain would be much happier with someone who could love her properly.

Of course, Berta understood on a rational level that protecting her here at the shrine was for the best. But she felt sorry the child had no other options. Berta was an emotionally distant woman—she didn't know how to spoil a child, let alone serve as her surrogate mother.

She made the lemonade out of guilt. She couldn't reach out and hug Aliénore, but she might be able to ease her physical pain somewhat. That was the answer she arrived at. She studied medicinal herbs and ordered what wasn't available on the island from the mainland. Aliénore liked sweets, so she used plenty of the best honey to be had.

She hadn't been sure if the girl would like it, but when she tried it, her eyes sparkled and she said it was delicious. Berta didn't have words for the feeling that flitted through her breast at that moment. She still didn't.

The time she spent with Aliénore was unlike anything she'd experienced before, and it flew by. But what was that time like for Aliénore? She appeared reckless but in truth was clever. She appeared thoughtless but in truth was kind. If she hadn't been here at the shrine, Berta was sure she would have soared through the world. This place must have been quite a cramped cage for her. So when the marriage in Adelbide was arranged, Berta was deeply relieved.

Berta, if I get lonely, can I come back here?

This isn't your home anymore.

She had answered in her usual brusque manner. Aliénore called her mean and pouted. But what else could she have said? What right did she have to tell the girl to come back whenever she wanted, let alone to welcome her back like family?

And when Berta learned that the girl had died, she didn't mourn.

Like a dutiful daughter, Aliénore had sent regular letters after moving to Adelbide. Berta had never once sent a reply, but still the letters came sailing

over the ocean as casually as a morning hello. Mostly they were about Adolphus Castiel.

At first, she said things like, “He’s a handsome man, but cold.” Then it was, “What a blundering dunderhead,” and before long, “Such a darling man.” Eventually the Castiel household welcomed a willful little princess, and for the first time, Berta knit a small pair of slippers and sent them off.

Before long, Aliénore fell ill. But she was the same as she’d always been. Just as she had silently put up with her suffering as a child, she continued sending letters to Berta. Each time Berta opened one, her fears that Aliénore’s health might fail were soothed.

It seemed that finally, far across the sea, she had allowed herself to rely on someone. Berta could tell from how happy she sounded when she described the revolting lemonade Adolphus made for her. Berta felt sure that beautiful bird had spread her wings and lived her last years in freedom. How could Berta be sad?

She didn’t put up a gravestone for Aliénore, and she refused to accept her remains. Adolphus was so insistent about it, she started to wonder if there was something wrong with him. But she did not give in. Of course she didn’t. The girl had finally won her freedom. She had finally spread her wings and flown where she liked. Wouldn’t it be cruel to shut her up in this place all over again?

But...

Berta thought of the girl with the pale green eyes. Was it true that Aliénore had told her daughter, Scarlett, to search for the starry crown? Hadn’t this place been a hateful cage to her?

Berta took some soft silver-green leaves from a wooden basket on the floor, minced them, and placed them in her mortar. She had picked them from the bed of sage earlier.

The pale purple carpet of flowers hadn’t always grown at the shrine.

One day several years after Aliénore came to live with her, Berta realized that unfamiliar flowers were blooming all around the shrine. The smell was unmistakably that of the herb Berta hated. There were too many of them to be

explained by birds randomly dropping the seeds. Someone must have intentionally planted them. Berta knew only one person who would do something like that.

When she questioned her suspect, admittedly making more of a fuss than was merited, Aliénore confessed immediately. She shrugged, totally devoid of guilt, and asked with a smile, “Berta, don’t you know what sage means in the language of flowers?”

The language of flowers?

Yes, the language of flowers.

Berta narrowed her eyes suspiciously. Aliénore smiled again, clearly enjoying herself.

It means a happy home.

Berta was at a loss for words. Still, she managed a sarcastic reply. “Then I can’t think of a worse place to plant them.” She couldn’t remember what Aliénore’s face looked like when she said it. All she remembered were her words.

“You have bad eyes, Berta,” she said happily, as if she was sharing an important secret.

That’s why I planted a lot, to be sure you could see them.

Berta mixed the crushed sage with other herbs and dumped them all into the pitcher. From another jar she scooped a heaping spoonful of golden honey and mixed it into the water. Then she took a glass from the shelf and filled it with the freshly made lemonade. The glass, which had a small smudge on the rim, had been Aliénore’s favorite.

The low-slanting sun shone on the small jar atop the table, casting a blue shadow on the wood grain. The color reminded her a little of the ocean and a little of the sky.

When was the last time she’d heard that voice say her name? It must have been the day Aliénore left the island. Just before she stepped onto the boat that had come from Adelbide to fetch her, she looked back as if she’d

remembered something.

Berta!

Her smile had always reminded Berta of the sun.

One day I'll come back to visit...

Berta looked up. A little girl was sitting at the table, her chin in her hand, swinging her legs and smiling. Berta's eyes went wide, and she froze. From somewhere, she heard the girl's voice from her memory go on.

I will, Berta.

And when I do, make me that lemonade again!

There was something she had been wanting to say for years. Something she had thought it would be wrong for her to say. To Berta, the words seemed almost like a curse. But that nosy, cheeky guest of hers had insisted it was a blessing. She said that Aliénore had been happy here.

With lightly trembling hands, Berta placed the glass of lemonade before the little blue jar. The cup made a soft clinking sound. Berta let out a breath, almost a laugh.

“...Welcome home, silly girl.”



**Constance
Grail**

Certifiably cheeky seven-teen-year-old. Just when she thinks everything has been settled, Cornelia Faris pulls the rug out from under her feet. Still wondering what the heck the starry crown is supposed to be, but has a vague feeling the answer is something bad and therefore plans to pretend none of this ever happened. ←new!



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old who, to be brutally honest, doesn't even care that much about the starry crown. After all, she's the one who decides her fate, not some silly old crown. Sees Cornelia's diary as a good way to kill time, meaning a certain ordinary teenage girl will probably get pulled into yet more trouble. ←new!



**Randolph
Ulster**

Ultimately spent the entire trip either searching for freight or blending into the background.



Berta Neuen

Extremely awkward, stubborn, and slightly servile miser. Always regretted not being able to save the child she took in way back when, but recently, a surprisingly cheeky girl came barging into the shrine and turned her regrets to dust. ←new!

Won't tell anyone, but intends to keep watch over the shrine for the rest of her life, so that child can return whenever she wishes.

Basilio Fargo

Has a vague notion of what his wife does for work but, since he's a meathead, doesn't give it much thought.

Daniella Fargo

Turns out to be the Kimberly Smith of Soldita. Although her position isn't hereditary, her father recognized her talent and passed his job on to her. Hasn't given up her dream of being a historian, but lately has been struggling with a boss who won't let her change professions. ←new!

Incidentally, her boss is Berta Neuen's nephew.

**The Girl with
Black Hair**

Was away for a long time in a far-off land but decided to come home for a taste of her favorite lemonade.

The Boatman

Still hasn't gotten his pedal boat back.



Abigail O'Brian blinked in surprise. The butler was standing in front of her, a heavy-looking paper sack in his arms. Lemons just beginning to turn from green to yellow were peeking from the top.

"Where did that come from?" she asked.

"From the Duke of Castiel, I believe," he replied.

In response to Abigail's puzzled look, Sebastian, the butler, lowered his brows in consternation.

"...But why?" Abigail asked. She wasn't asking why Adolphus Castiel had sent the O'Brian household a gift, but rather, why lemons? After all, they weren't even in season.

"The delivery boy said they had too many. Shall I have the cook make a pie? There are quite a few here."

The skilled butler had already moved on to the next problem: how to consume such a large quantity of fruit. Abigail smiled and agreed to his plan. Then she turned to the large hound of a man sprawled impolitely on the sofa.

"Oh, stop sulking, Rudy," she scolded.

"...I'm not sulking."

"And stop being dishonest. Lucia will come home soon whether you worry over her or not."

Abigail's loyal hound turned his back to his master, pretending not to hear.

"Now you're ignoring me? When did you become so unreasonable?"

"Shut up and stop treating me like a kid."

His habit of talking back at the least provocation was nothing if not childish, but Abigail didn't feel the need to point that out. Instead, she smiled cheerfully.

"Dear me, who was it that insisted they would never, ever allow their darling

little girl to go off by herself to see some prince whose parents we don't even know?"

That was how Constance Grail and Randolph Ulster had gotten roped into the plan. Abigail breathed an exaggerated sigh and laid her palm against her forehead. Aldous flushed.

"Come on, now, let's not start making things up. All I said was that it would be dangerous for a child to travel abroad by herself...!"

"By herself? What about the bodyguards? We could have sent a maid, too."

Aldous didn't respond, probably because he knew the odds were against him in this conversation. The truth was, the girl was like a little sister to him, and he was terribly fond of her. But Abigail worried that if he went on like this, things would become difficult in a few years.

"You know, Aldous, girls become brides in the blink of an eye," she teased.

"That's a load of crap," he snapped, clasp ing his hands behind his head and closing his eyes, still frowning. Abigail shrugged and called the butler to ask for the day's newspaper. Soon the rustle of pages turning was the only sound in the room.

"Hey, Abby," Aldous said after a few minutes.

"Yes?"

".....How long is the blink of an eye?"

Abby dropped her newspaper, walked over to the sofa, and ruffled Aldous's black hair. He barked for her to stop, but she ignored him. Her mutt was just too cute.

Once his hair was a thorough mess, he stood up glumly. "You dropped this," he said sullenly, picking up the paper Abby had been reading. He glanced at the page it had fallen open to. There was a column on foreign affairs, and of all things, it was about Soldita.

"I can't believe this...," he murmured.

Hearing him, Abigail's shoulders began to shake with laughter. Briefly glancing at her, he turned his attention back to the newspaper and peered suspiciously

at the article. The next moment, he scowled ferociously.

“What the hell have they been doing over there?!”



Abigail O'Brian

The original model for an average face.

Type of parent who wants her adorable daughter to travel as much as possible.

Thinks she has the cutest dog in the world.



Aldous Clayton

Abigail's loyal hound.

Type of older brother who wants his adorable little sister to live at home forever.

Pretends not to care, but actually thinks it's about a million years too early for his little sister to have a boyfriend.

Incidentally, he thinks he's hiding it, but everyone in the household knows how overprotective he is.



"I'll come again soon! Next time I'll visit your boarding school, Uly!"

"I'm looking forward to it."

"But girls aren't allowed there!"

Amid the hustle and bustle of travelers on the central wharf at Cyon Port, a striking white passenger liner sat at anchor. The emblem of the Walter Robinson Company was painted on the bow. Lucia stood on the gangplank, reluctantly saying good-bye to Ulysses and Antonio.

"I look forward to seeing you again, too, Mr. Antonio," she giggled.

"...You don't have to call me 'Mr.,'" he answered, the tip of his nose turning red. He turned away, and Lucia smiled happily.

"Then you can call me just Lucia, too," she announced.

"Hey, why are you two so friendly? You can call me Uly, too, Antonio," Ulysses said, pouting like a regular boy his age for once.

"All three of us are the best of friends." Lucia laughed.

"U-Uly...?" Antonio echoed, turning even redder as he tried out the new name.

Lucia walked up the gangplank, turning back to wave several times.

Then, the ship pulled slowly away from the island, its horn blasting. As the silhouettes of the two boys waving good-bye disappeared into the distance, Lucia began to cry.

"Oh, Lucia," Connie said, hugging her. The girl sobbed even harder. Parting was sad even if they'd promised to meet again. Connie lifted Lucia in her arms and rubbed her small back soothingly. Then she carried her into the entrance hall and set her down on a sofa. Lucia must have tired herself out crying, because as Connie patted her back, her eyes began to close.

"Sleeping?" Randolph asked. He had just returned from bringing the luggage

to their rooms. Connie looked up and smiled wryly.

“Yes. She said she didn’t sleep very well last night.”

“She acts so grown up, I tend to forget she’s still a child.”

Randolph looked down with worry at Lucia as she softly snored.

“I’ll go find a blanket for her,” Connie said, standing up and approaching a crew member.

When she returned with a soft blanket in her arms, Lucia was curled up like a cat. For some reason, Randolph was sitting next to her. “Dear thing!” Connie murmured. Lucia’s hand was clasped tightly around the hem of his jacket.

“Maybe she thinks you’re Aldous,” Connie suggested. Randolph, unable to remove her little hand, looked utterly befuddled.

“...She’s surprisingly strong,” he said. Connie giggled. She tucked the blanket around Lucia and sat down next to Randolph.

“Constance?”

His cerulean eyes looked down at her questioningly, but she didn’t answer. Instead, she leaned her head against him.

“It all went by so quickly,” she murmured.

“I know,” he agreed.

“I wanted to see the trompe l’oeil at Il Laza Cathedral, and climb Agrit Hill, and try blowing glass at one of the workshops. I wanted to make a red goblet like the one I saw at the opera in the capital. And—”

She pressed her face softly against Randolph’s arm.

“—I wanted to spend more time together.”

“We can come again,” he said placidly.

She knew he meant it, but she couldn’t help asking, “But when...?”

“When?”

“It’s just that when we get back to Adelbide, I’m sure you’ll start right up with work again. Will you have any time off? It would be awful if you had to give up

your days off for the year because you took this trip—”

Randolph looked away guiltily.

“—Randolph?”

When she turned her moist eyes on him, he finally gave in to his fate and said, “...I didn’t give up *all* my days off.”

That meant, at the very least, he would be skipping some of his holidays. Connie stared at him and said as pointedly as she could manage, “I can’t believe it! You work too much! If you keep staying up all night, you’re going to get sick...!”

“One night’s really nothing.”

“What did you just say?”

She glared at him fixedly. With a solemn face, Randolph said, “I will deal with the problem,” and nodded. Then he looked down, dismayed.

“...So would you perhaps consider forgiving me? Constance?”

He peered kindly into her face. Connie felt like she was going to fall into his blue eyes. She almost nodded but cleared her throat instead.

“...I’d like you to promise me something first.”

“If it’s within my power, I will promise you anything.”

Connie’s mood improved slightly. But only slightly.

“Will you put on the Il Rosso costume for me?”

She’d intended to sound like she was still angry, but her voice came out bouncier than planned. Randolph gave her a bewildered look. Then, thanks to his natural intelligence, he seemed to figure it out. His face stiffened, and he said in a slightly strained voice, “...You don’t mean right now, do you?”

“I do!” she answered. There was a brief silence. Then, in a voice as grave as if he had been chased to the edge of a cliff, he said, “.....I don’t have the costume.”

“I brought it along,” Connie said.

“Why?”

He looked at her, astonished.

She had borrowed it, of course. Daniella had apparently taken pity on Connie and lent it to her when she wailed that she hadn't yet convinced Randolph to put it on.

Connie looked up at Randolph expectantly. He was glancing around with uncharacteristic unease. After a silence of thirty or forty seconds, he said in a low voice, “...I'm sorry.”

Connie was momentarily speechless. Her eyes filled with tears.

“B-but you said you'd do anything!”

“There are certain things I can do and certain things I cannot!” he retorted, raising his voice.

“Shut up, you two!” Scarlett thundered. “You're going to wake Lucia!”

Incidentally, around this time an article was circulating in Adelbide about an atrocious “trial troll” who had come and gone like a comet on a small island in the Republic of Soldita, causing a new wave of rumors to sweep through society about a certain notorious viscount's daughter.

Of course, Constance Grail had no idea about any of that as she sailed toward home.



**Constance
Grail**

Seventeen-year-old who's ready to raid her fiancé's office at any moment. A lot happened, but in hindsight, it all made for good memories, so she definitely plans to visit El Sol again. Has acquired the unfortunate new nickname "trial troll." ←new!



**Scarlett
Castiel**

Eternal sixteen-year-old who couldn't help exploding at the two lovebirds' inane argument. Wishes they would explode instead.



**Randolph
Ulster**

His Excellency the Grim Reaper, resisting a second cosplay disaster at all costs. Secretly vowed to prepare for his wedding when he gets home, but doesn't yet know that a lot of shit went down in Adelbide while he was gone. ←new!

Has a feeling his fiancée is going to run out of patience pretty soon and raid his office.



Lucia O'Brian

Little lady who has matured just a bit. Jealous of the boys after hearing about all the fun Uly and Antonio have at their boarding school, and wants to grow up fast to be as kind and strong as Connie and Scarlett. Might sneak into the boys' dorm on the mainland one day and cause some trouble.



Ulysses Faris

The ultimate heroine, once again almost kidnapped. Had an awesome trip despite this, what with seeing the sights and eating gelato and especially making new friends. Sounds like he's actually got some serious backbone.



Antonio Fargo

Currently has an impertinent streak but, given how eccentric his friends are, will likely grow up to be wise and understanding. Never lost his soft spot for beautiful people and probably won't ever lose it.

AFTERWORD

Has everyone been well? Tokiwa here. I recently became aware of a thing called basal metabolism when I failed to shrink back to my original size after pigging out. I'd been living a decadent lifestyle that didn't require much muscle, but since everything I read and everyone I ask keep telling me basal metabolism is muscle, these days I'm eating my boiled chicken and muttering "muscle, muscle" (stop eating and exercise already!).

Anyhow, enough about my nonexistent muscles. On to Volume 4 of *The Holy Grail of Eris*. Um, right, the afterword to Volume 4. As you know, I fully intended to wrap everything up in three volumes, and I shed tears while bidding my readers farewell in the afterword last time. But to my immense gratitude, I've been given the opportunity to publish a fourth volume. I write that like it's nothing, but I was probably more shocked about it than anyone, and I'm still shocked now.

This fortunate turn of events was entirely due to the support of my wonderful readers. Each word I receive from you is overflowing with love and good taste. It's food for my soul, like a real-life spirit bomb. I don't have many opportunities to express my appreciation, so let me take this moment to shout at the top of my lungs: Thank you, everyone, from the bottom of my heart!

In the previous volume, Scarlett achieved her revenge in a sense. But strictly speaking, she wasn't done. To borrow her words, she still needed to spend eighty-four more years without regrets (and she wouldn't take no for an answer when it came to bringing her accomplice along for the ride). If the previous three volumes were about making peace with the past, then maybe this one is where her true revenge—that is, the story of her future—begins.

There's just one problem. What does it really mean to live without regrets anyway?

The whole time I was writing Volume 4, I kept muttering, "What does it mean,

what does it mean?” but here I am at the afterword, and I still haven’t come up with a good answer.

Nevertheless, while I haven’t answered the question of what a life without regrets means for Scarlett (and ultimately, the answer may be up to her), for me at least, this volume has been an opportunity to think about the decisions Scarlett’s mother, Aliénore, and her ancestor Cornelia Faris made in their lives, and how those decisions impacted the future. After all, Scarlett exists because of them, and perhaps some answers about Scarlett’s revenge can be found in their lives. Or maybe not—I’m not sure. But even if their lives were difficult, and even if they had regrets, I hope that what remains of those lives will bring light to someone living right now.

I’ve actually never written a novel within a set timeframe before, and at first I didn’t know what to do. But my editor was right there by my side as usual, and I managed to take off from the starting line. Speaking of my editor, I think the reason I reached my goal at all was because each time I was about to run off in some crazy direction, they gave me the right advice to get back on track. I also very much appreciate the help of my new editor, who kindly guided me all the way to the end of Volume 4.

Once again, Yu-nagi created transcendently beautiful illustrations for this volume. Each one is so wonderful, I could easily spend an hour talking about it. But to mention just the cover, I love that you can tell at a glance that Connie and Randolph are on vacation. The blueness of the sky and the brightness of the sunshine are perfect, and so is the way Connie is holding Randolph’s arm completely naturally, so you know right away that they’ve grown closer since the end of the last book. Also, everyone’s face is just so adorable. Outstandingly adorable. Scarlett’s smug expression and Connie’s smile, and even Randolph. I almost fainted at the fabulous frontispiece illustrations, and the picture of the three girls is so precious, I got down on my knees in gratitude when I saw it.

Finally, I want to say that I could have never completed this marathon of the last few months on my own. The reason I’ve had the privilege of writing this fourth volume is because of every one of you who reads the series as well as all the people who have supported me (Momoyama’s comic version is also terrific and always inspiring). Traveling abroad is still difficult these days, but in my

mind, at least, I'm at the center of the world, crying out my thanks. Thank you so, so much.

So good-bye for now, and I hope we meet again one day.

Kujira Tokiwa

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